

vitality

issue 1 | february 2015



thank you!

thank you so much
to those readers
who donated to
our kickstarter
campaign. without
your support,
vitality would never
have happened!

special thanks to:

Christina Cole • Renae Jones • Caitlin Bonnette • Jessica Goerling
Jay Millett • Nat Fowler • Kristine E Beckmann • Amber Midgett
Nessi Alexander • Cat • Jessica Carmona • Robert Stiteler
Chris Ellorris • K. Lighty • Louise Valentine • Kayla B. • Kit E.

staff

Jesse Ellorris
Senior Editor

Rebecca Evans
Poetry Editor


Samantha Wheaton
Copy Editor

- attraction to/relationships between women
- attraction to/relationships between men
- attraction to/relationships with multiple genders
- nonbinary (all variations)
- transgender
- asexual spectrum
- aromantic spectrum
- queer, unspecified

legend

readvitality.com

 facebook.com/readvitality

readvitality.tumblr.com 

 twitter.com/readvitality

This magazine is © 2015 by Jesse Ellorris and Vitality Magazine. All works © 2015 by the individual author or artist credited. Anything not credited belongs to Vitality Magazine. All rights reserved.

Cover art by Alex Garcia, a twenty-year-old transgender, demiromantic, demisexual freelance illustrator. More of faer art can be found at alexpgarcia.tumblr.com.

table of contents

Two Grandfathers ●	5
by Caitlin Wilson / Illustrated by Rebecca Schauer	
(It Can Be) Difficult to Be Human [Sometimes] ●	7
by Aimee Herman	
A Muse Afire ●●	8
by Kayla Bashe	
Edna ●●	15
by Jan Steckel	
Who Gets the Door ●●	17
by Erika Gisela Abad Merced / Illustrated by Alex Garcia	
A Boy Named Thomas ●●●	18
by Evelyn Deshane	
On Circumambience ●	23
by Kevin McLellan	
The Best Day ●	24
by Claudie Arseneault	
The Sorceress Who Had No Heart ●	28
by Coral Moore / Illustrated by Kristina Stipetic	
Finding Home ●●●●	44
by A. Merc Rustad	
Architecture of a Blistex Pot ●	51
by Rebecca Evans	
The Hollow ●	53
by Kendra Leigh Speedling / Illustrated by Savannah Horrocks	
Proof ●	62
by Johnny Sfarnas	



two grandfathers

by caitlin wilson

Fisher-grandfather and Net-Mender-grandfather tell stories as the days draw down to winter, one with his sharp hooks glinting in his lap and the other casting tiny shadow-nets with each stitch, and the best is the story about the day they found me.

Fisher-grandfather starts:

"It was the eve of the spirits, and we were pulling in one last net before turning for home. The wind was whistling to itself in the rigging—"

Net-Mender-grandfather interrupts.

"The wind was doing *nothing* of the sort. It was blowing, and that's it, and that's all."

Fisher-grandfather rolls his eyes.

"The wind, in any case, was *blowing through our rigging*, and it was high time we returned, for on the eve of the spirits, my eel-daughter, strange things are known to happen.

"We pulled and pulled on that old net—"

Net-Mender-grandfather interrupts again.

"It was not an *old* net; it was my finest and you know it, Pavel Aleksandreyev. At least tell the story right."

Fisher-grandfather leans across the arm of his chair and kisses Net-Mender-grandfather's cheek. He *always* does that when Net-Mender-grandfather is angry, and Net-Mender-grandfather pretends to be miffed, but his eyes sparkle like fish scales so we know he isn't *really* mad.

Fisher-grandfather picks up a new lure and the thread of the story, tying one into the other.

"We pulled and pulled, but at last we saw that we could not retrieve the net. It must have been caught on some sunken log, or perhaps even an ancient czar's battleship. But it was stuck, stuck, *stuck* down there, and the sun was setting already."

This is the part where I chime in.

"But then, right as you turned to cut the last float free—"

"*Right* as we slipped the knife under the last knot—"

"A lady with eyes like the space between stars and long green hair rose from the deep, and in her arms—"

"Was a little scaly baby, weeping and wailing as if she foretold the end of the world!"

"And that was me!"

Fisher-grandfather scoops me into his side and nuzzles my scalp.

"Yes indeed, little eel-daughter, that was *you*. And the beautiful lady never said a word, but she kissed you right on your forehead and

then she stared into each of our eyes. I can never forget how she looked as though her heart were breaking. She must have loved you very much, little eel-daughter, to come all the way to the surface, and what must she have thought to find no royal barge, but only two old men and a torn fishing net! I tried to promise her with my eyes that we would love you as our own, for it was clear that she was no ordinary lady, and I doubt she could even hear our voices in the thin air."

Net-Mender-grandfather scoffs,

"She was beautiful, but no greater a beauty than our own village women. Her eyes were only a mother's eyes, and her pain that of any other woman losing her babe."

"Ooh, you hush, you old Mikhail Grigorov," Fisher-grandfather admonishes. "You have no poetry in your soul, and you should not dampen that in others which you lack yourself. Besides, she only looked at you a moment. Clearly I had the better figure, and even now look at me! I am a paragon among men."

Net-Mender-grandfather scowls at the net in his lap, but I can see him blushing even so. He loves Fisher-grandfather very much, I know.

"Now then, little eel-daughter, what is left of the story? Ah, yes. We brought you home and put you in a washbasin full of seawater, and my darling eel-daughter, you laughed and laughed when we did that, though you had sobbed the whole way home. I do believe you were happy to be on the land and in the sea at once, you munchkin thing.

"And we love you very much."

If I stretch, I can reach the floor to push my basin between Net-Mender-grandfather on one side and Fisher-grandfather on the other. And they both put aside their glinting hooks and rough hempen rope, and they lean down at the same time and kiss me *loud* on both ears, which makes me giggle and squirm. Then they pack away their things, and bank the fire so I won't be too warm or too cold, and they creak away to their bed. Fisher-grandfather winks at me and pinches Net-Mender-grandfather's rear, and Net-Mender-grandfather jumps like he always does and swats at him. I can hear their grumbly voices, one rolling like the combers that sometimes stream across our beach, the other like the deep boom-crack of sea ice breaking, until I fall asleep.



caitlin wilson is works as an editorial assistant for a sustainability magazine. This is her first fiction publication.

rebecca schauer is a twenty-three-year-old cisgender lesbian artist. She's the artist behind the webcomic *Fruitloop & Mr. Downbeat*. More of her work can be found at beccasartstuff.weebly.com.

(it can be) difficult to be human [sometimes]

by aimee herman

Take fourteen hours out of your day to create a manual for making it through a *mood*. Call up the lover who always mispronounced your favorite word and remind them the importance of expiration dates, clean sheets and the texture of toast. Mediate an argument between humans you never met before but feel the desire to restore. Give your mouth away just for an evening and forget about your allergy to men, moustaches and margarine. In order to make new friends, ~~sometimes you need to~~ pretend you understand how to download or upload and logout immediately. On the second day of Autumn, you will receive an unmarked scab from someone who used to know seventeen things about you; this will be their version of a love letter; do not eat it; or if you do, tell no one of this. Everyday thereafter, this encrusted wound will cause you to mispronounce your favorite word. You will choose silence over speech lessons. The next time you weep will be three years two months and four days from now. It will be attributed to southern women or a misplaced pronoun. Take felted megaphone and press against pink mouth. Push out every version of queer you can think of and let whatever still forms leak out like bits of unformed song. Audition a chorus of revelers. Parade around your city in every version of rainbow your skin illuminates. Sometimes, to be a human ~~can be difficult~~ is to remain even in the moments when there is nothing left to do but repeat the echoes of carnival reminding you who you are.



aimee herman is a Brooklyn-based poet and performance artist. She is an adjunct professor at Bronx Community College and works with both Poetry Teachers NYC and the Red Umbrella project. For more information, including where to find more of her poetry, go to aimeeherman.wordpress.com.

a muse afire

by kayla bashe

Once, a king who decided to outlaw theatergoing burned a theater.

He had his men trap the actors and the audience inside. The actors, knowing that attempting to escape would be futile, continued the show even as tongues of flame ignited the walls around them-- and the audience, who had been banging desperately on the doors, was entranced once again by their stagecraft. Instead of dying with desperate screams on their throats, they died in the midst of wild applause. But the fire was just as enchanted by the beauty of their performance, and it transformed the troupe instead of burning them. And they lived... forever.

...

The troupe has three acrobats of varying sizes and a strongman, but no fire-eater. All of them, from beautiful old Ruthe, who plays the grandmothers, down to little Ainsley, the tiniest clown who plays boy princes and heroine's sons, could fill in for him.

They are all eaters of fire.

Today their Player Queen is Oberon, the King of Shadows, and her night-dark hair is short and slick. With the addition of a starlight cloak, her customary black becomes the garments of fairy royalty. Her lover, Innocentio, performs Titania. Everyone laughs to see the beautiful performer, his eyelashes long in sleep, awake and fall madly in love with an ass-- and fondle the donkey's muzzle and phallus both enthusiastically. The audience howls, falls from their seats, and nearly chokes.

Afterwards, she sheds her cloak, ze the translucent wings, and they come out to greet the crowd. After an hour of accepting compliments, answering questions like "How do you do that?" or "Was that real magic?" with a smile and a finger raised to her lips, the Player Queen knows it is time to start clearing out the audience. A good show always ought to end when the audience still wishes that it never would.

And then it is time to strike the set, load everything into the carts, pack up, and move on. By the end of the month, they will accomplish thirty-six performances in thirty-six different towns.

It is in town twenty-seven that something goes wrong.

"Open your ears, you," Innocentio calls, running into his lover's tent with almost childish enthusiasm.

The Player Queen is twisting through a series of acrobatic warm ups, but when Innocentio wants her to listen, she always looks up. "Yes?"

"I heard there's a preacher in town, and I thought I'd listen to

our competition. See if I can pick up any tricks of improvisation for our performances tonight."

"As long as you're back by curtain-up." The Player Queen twines herself about Innocentio like a cat and kisses his cheek before letting him go.

Ze misses first call, which is all right, because ze wears the least makeup of all of them-- just a bit of blush to bring out those already-rosy cheeks and a smudge of pigment to define the brows. She always applies it for him, tilting his chin upwards to look into his eyes; and she knows that although ze could do it himself, ze likes the ritual. Sometimes they run lines. When Innocentio misses second call, though...

It seems as if everyone's trying to crowd into her tent at once.

"Calm down, calm down," she says, getting to her feet. "Don't all speak over each other's lines. Let me understand what it is you have to say."

"Your dear heart's done a bunker," says Ruthe worriedly. "I don't have the slightest idea what's wrong with that youth."

Little Ainsley's bottom lip wobbles. "Are we going to have to cancel the performance?"

The Player Queen stands to reassure them. "We're not canceling the show. Have we canceled one yet?"

A resounding chorus of "No!" comes from her troupe.

"Then what show will we do?" another performer queries tremulously. "As much as I'd love to see your Mephistopheles again, we can't do *The Fall of Faustus* without Faust."

Her mind is agile as her feet as she quicksteps through possibilities: what will play well in this town, and what can they manage without Innocentio? "Let's run *Alfonso, or the Agnostic Old Fool*, put the tumbling in the interval, leave out the Lazzi of Kisses and cut out all the swear words. Afterwards, we'll all go on the hunt. Change costumes, now."

Alfonso, or... is a commedia about a strict but non-believing father who wants to prevent his beautiful young daughter from marrying a poor but godly man. Two angels, Harlequin and Columbina, come down to earth to force him to believe in a deity by setting up coincidences that can be the work of none other but the Divine. They cut the part of the funny old woman by swapping lines around and give Columbina to Ruthe. Cutting all but one of the soliloquies means the Player Queen can give the role of the male romantic lead to the Strongman, so she herself performs Harlequin with slick brilliance and dazzling flair, tumbling over her feet to make everyone laugh. But her thoughts are running like a backdrop in her head: *where is my Innocentio, where in the world is my dear blonde heart?*

Too gentle for offstage combat, ze may have been waylaid

by brigands-- thrown into a well, or the river, or possibly worse. The members of her troupe do not die or age. They are hardly ever ill. But they can be harmed.

...

After the show, the troupe roams the town and the roads beyond looking for Innocentio. They find hir by the crossroads out of town, sitting on the grass in a way that's sure to stain hir trousers. The Player Queen runs to hir at once, her actors following. Innocentio's face is as openly confused as a child's, and hir usual air of knowing playfulness somehow gone; when she takes hir hands, they are soft, but cold, like those of the dead. She keeps her startled gasp held tight and silenced behind a mask of friendliness. Even if ze's fallen down and hit hir head, panicking never helps. "Hello, love. Do you know who we are?"

"Who am I?" And then, hir words coming out in a rush as ze takes in the gaudy outfits of the people surrounding hir, "I'm not an actor, am I? The Priest said theater is immoral."

Everyone else just gapes, but the Player Queen improvises an explanation lickety-split, laying her hand on Innocentio's knee. "A member of our company. One who mends the sets and costumes, and who tends to our horses and our gear."

"I think I can manage that," ze says. "Mending is an honorable trait in the eyes of our Lord, if it is useful. The Priest said so."

Later ze will shy away from touch, but now, hir new unthinking mind not fully formed yet, Innocentio lets Player Queen fall to her knees beside hir and wrap hir in her arms.

...

The Innocentio she had known was all things pure, kind, and graceful. A brilliant artist with an easy laugh, ze sounded like an angel when ze sang, and when ze was crying out underneath her at the close of night, ze was a creature of flesh and lusts indeed. This is a blank slate of Innocentio, a tabula rasa, a hollow shell of her once and future dearest heart.

The Player Queen has never played Ophelia. There's too much of a fire in her, a spirit too drawn to swiftness and the sword, yet now she quotes the Drowned Maiden: "Oh, what a noble mind here is overthrown."

She feels like Beatrice swearing her oath of vengeance: *I will find who has done this to you, and I will eat his heart in the marketplace.*

...

Innocentio is not only newly religious and an amnesiac, but ze is entirely stripped of hir former intelligence and strength of character. Ze does exactly-- exactly! -- as ze's told. For example, if you instruct hir, "Go to the butcher and get a pound of raw steak for Ruthe's face mask," you have to make sure that you also told hir, "And come back

afterwards." Otherwise ze just stands there outside the shop, like an abandoned puppy, waiting for someone to take hir home. Sometimes ze sings to himself, then stops suddenly, as if afraid to be noticed. In those moments, the soft, perfect huskiness of hir voice is just as the Player Queen remembers it, and longing swells and pains her heart.

...

While they unload the properties in a new stop, the Player Queen notices that Innocentio lifts boxes awkwardly, as if trying to avoid using hir right arm. "You're favoring that shoulder. Are you all right?"

Ze has to consider it. "I don't know, but the Priest said that those who believe will be healed."

"Get your shirt off. Let me see if you're hurt."

Inside her tent, after ze shrugs off the garment, the Player Queen seats hir on a crate and runs strong hands over hir back; ze stays obediently still. Palms press against skin, and the tension and pain she feels there make her wince. "When did you last stretch?"

Ze tilts hir head, confused. "Stretch?"

"Actors should always stretch before performances. Keeps us limber."

I'm not an actor, the Player Queen expects hir to say. Instead, ze leans in and looks at her. Really looks at her. "Can I make you feel better?"

That catches her so, so off guard. "What makes you think I need help?" she asks warily.

"You look sad. I've seen you. You never look sad. Not with this strange stillness. You're always talking or moving or dancing. Like a tongue of flame from a bonfire, the way it flickers and leaps. Dangerous, but beautiful."

The adoration in hir eyes kindles old sentiments. "Don't move," the Player Queen murmurs, moving towards hir with the grace of a snake.

"Will that help you?"

"It might help me if I kissed you."

Innocentio nods. "You can try that."

She slides a hand up hir thigh and leans in close.

Ze feels so damn cold, her perfect dear heart with sunshine hair, and she tries to kiss the fire back into hir. It would work, she's sure, if ze only knew how to kiss her back. But the fire won't catch. It's like ze's already left this world. Her dear heart has become a marble statue, with all the stillness that implies.

Ze pulls back, shakes zir head. "That kiss felt like an act of lust. Lust is very, very sinful."

"It's not sinful. We're in love." Innocentio doesn't understand. How can she make hir understand? She seizes on a piece of poetry

from an old tumbling act, reciting it with all the feeling she contains. "You are the lark to my magpie, the sun to my moon."

But ze doesn't understand the metaphor. "I can't be the sun. I would burn." When she moves towards hir again, ze pulls away. "Don't touch me. I knew you were dangerous-- I just knew it!" Ze slaps the Player Queen across the face-- not a stage slap, but a real slap that makes her face sting-- and runs from the tent.

The Player Queen knows the proper ways to faint and fall. She's played Hamlet's death. But this collapse starts with an undignified loss of strength and ends with an ugly crumpling. *This bit would never do on stage*, she thinks. *We'd have to reblock this whole scene...*

Exit consciousness. Exit her.

...

Faces appear before her, sudden bright spots; she is in bed, and the sun through the window shines above huts.

"You missed first call."

"Can you do the show?"

She pushes words through a thick fog. "What kind of a Player Queen would I be if I couldn't manage a matinee?" Departing from blankets and bed makes her shiver. "Get my coat. And my gloves."

Ruthe looks worried. "They're in storage. You haven't asked for them in years, love."

"I'm doing the show with my gloves and my coat. They should be with the props from Richard the Third," she says, getting out of bed. Normally she is as limber as an ink-black cat, but her muscles feel stiff. Suddenly, she staggers; as one, everyone hurries to catch her and prop her back up on her feet.

"I'll be all right," she says sternly. To them, it's a reassurance; to herself, it is an order. "I can do the show."

The matinee is like slow starvation; by curtain call she is trembling with chill, though she smiles through it nonetheless. Afterwards, sitting on a gilt-and-paint throne, she calls the troupe together. "We're changing the route."

When the troupe finds Innocentio at the priest's main temple, she can hardly bear to look at hir. Ze stands between marble pillars and preaches modesty, the eschewing of makeup and finery, spanking one's children, submission to God.

There are moments when hir abhorrent words seem almost believable, for ze is as every bit as beautiful and charismatic now as ze was on the stage, and she has to recite speeches from the Alchemist under her breath to keep from crying out a soliloquy at the sheer wrongness of everything.

...

Afterwards, the troupe enters the temple. They are a motley

procession now; whatever chill infects their queen has spread to them. The age of years has started to show in their costumed finery, patterns fading to indistinguishable muddy shades. The Strongman's face is white with pain, and his muscles seem to visibly shrink, shrivel, and atrophy. One of little Ainsley's legs dangles uselessly, and he seems very small and very crumpled. New wrinkles form like crawling vines on Ruthe's face

The priest, most of his face concealed, smiles at them. "Have you come to collect this member of your troupe? Ze's seen the light." He moves his hood back.

The Player Queen recognizes him at last. "You burned our theater, The Lakehouse. There were children in the audience."

"And hopefully the flames showed them the error of their ways," he says, with a too-sweet smile.

You played the king, she almost says. Then she remembers that most people don't live their lives in front of canvas backdrops, and she corrects herself: "You were the king."

"Yes-- and instead of giving you death, I gave you a strange sort of life. But I've worked out how to remedy that. When ze first came to hear me speak, I drew the flame from your lover's heart and soul and bones, hir feet and fingertips. Now I will see all of you dead."

At a gesture, one of the priest's acolytes brings him a torch. The Player Queen feels her entire being straining towards the leaping flames.

"This bit of wood was taken from the ruins of your den of performative theatrical iniquity. Ze will refuse the torch, and therefore extinguish it-- not only a symbolic rejection of the sin of theater, but also undoing the magic spell that keeps you alive. At last I'll see you made vulnerable. I'll see you burn out."

The Player Queen paces around him with all the contained power of a jaguar preparing to spring, seething with energy, drawing on the last dregs of the flame within. "You may extinguish our lives, but the show will not stop. The music continues, and the lights still shine."

His expression is grim. "At the end of your lives, you will suffer in hell for your devilish ways."

Her technique and training does not fail. She will be brave-- or seem so, at least. So, drawing on all practice and apprenticeship, she smiles slyly, as if the whole world was watching her and marveling at her art. "At least I've lived." People always say that hell is fire-- but when she meets his eyes, she knows it's ice. Cold, dead, and banal, so cold that no one wants to move or breathe.

"Give me the torch, please," her sometime lover says politely.

The troupe clusters together, holds themselves as bravely as they can.

Innocentio takes a step towards the Player Queen and tilts his head. Ze points at her; innocent curiosity peeks out of his blue eyes, in contrast to the priest-king. "Why don't you weep?"

An answer comes easily. "Because I'm not the sort to have regrets. When there was something I wanted to do-- a role I wanted to play, a beautiful person I wanted to kiss-- I did it. I didn't waste time mucking about with calling myself bad and sinful. I was happy." Softly, she adds, "And so were you, Innocentio. When you were mine."

Wrapping his fingers around the torch, Innocentio meets his Queen's dark eyes. The devil's eyes were blue as ice, but her lover's are as blue as the heart of a flame.

"Then let it be known," ze says, "that I choose to burn. I choose to sin. My life is mine; I will be glad." As gracefully as any veteran fire-eater, ze brought the torch to his lips and swallowed the flame. Within seconds ze burns from within, doubled over and yelling out from what his body interprets as pain. But then his rictus of agony changes into a determined smile. The Player Queen can see his mind working, like a child learning to walk for the very first time, as ze figures out how to stand up tall. Then, with a flash of light and a whoosh, the flame disappears under his skin. Ze shakes himself out and smiles, radiant.

Vigor and heat have returned to his blood. Before, ze was as stone; now ze is the moon again, reflecting the sun. The fire ripples through them all. Faded costumes, bedraggled with holes, ravel, resequin, and glimmer again. Colors brighten. The acrobats whoop with joy and turn handstands, and the Strongman lifts Ruthe.

The king-turned-priest tries to exit, but the Player Queen seizes him in her strong sinewy arms, spreads her long-fingered hands out over his red, sweaty head, and snaps his neck. He doesn't get back up afterwards, not even when Little Ainsley claps. This isn't stage combat, after all.

One of his followers creeps nervously forward; the others follow. "If you don't mind, can you please not kill us?"

"We were only following him because this area is poor in trade and land, and we didn't know what else to do," another hurries to say.

All of them nod vigorously. "We'll work for you now, if you want."

One who seems to be higher in rank raises his hand. "You can have the building, if you want. We'll even help you put on plays in it."

Stagehands! And more than just stagehands, she thinks as she scans the room's build-- a proper trapdoor, a lift, a trapeze she can trust. A balcony. Tumbling silks for aerial dance-- she hasn't gone up on the silks since Verona, but she's sure she still has the knack for it. Already she knows where things will go.

"We'll have a theater," the Strongman breathes, wide-eyed.

Ruthe corrects: "We'll have a home."

With a low sound of excitement, the Player Queen beckons her lover close, and they kiss each other breathless. Everything is strength and heat and life again, bright as spotlights, bright as fire.



kayla bashe is a cisgender, bisexual college student and the author of several short novels exploring relationships between queer girls against the backdrop of science fiction and fantasy stories, including *My Lady King* and her most recent *To Stand in the Light*, both available on Amazon.

edna

by jan steckel

My grandparents' Brazilian cook
danced with a band at night.
Evenings, she'd samba
around the mahogany table,
ladling vichyssoise into
gilded bowls. On each bowl
she'd float a carved radish rose.

She called her gnarled feet
"dancer's hooves," claimed
to be ashamed of them.
Still, she painted her toenails
the color of dried blood,
let them peek through
peep-toed shoes.

If I had told her she was
my first female crush, she'd have
laughed like samba bells.
She'd have shaken, whistled, rattled,
boomed like her boyfriend's band.



jan steckel is a bisexual poet and writer whose poetry book *The Horizontal Poet* won a Lambda Literary Award for Bisexual Nonfiction. Two of her other books, *Mixing Tracks* and *The Underwater Hospital*, have also received awards for LGBT writing. You can find more of her work at jansteckel.com.



who gets the door

by erika gisela abad merced

An attempt to walk out of the cafe. Good conversation. Conversation that does not need to end, though touching hasn't happened yet. No hands. No arms. No accidental brushes. And yet, with Denny in hir flatcap and Cia twirling her fingers around the frills of her scarf, they stand. One way out. Two people. Four hands. A dozen options. Seconds are hours. Giggling erupts. Smiles break out on both faces. The question of who comes to the surface, right under the skin, as the sequence of events unravels behind them.

Cia grabs the handle. She holds on outside, waiting. Denny follows out, lip corner still pulled up from the unspoken. Down the steps, the corner doesn't cut them apart. Crowded close enough, unspoken words separated by a space, a beat, not commas or question marks or any other form of punctuation. Steps move to parks, then to cars, then to murals, soccer games, laughter, and while commitments call, meeting again is agreed. Engines start. Trains arrive. Smiles still sweep across distancing faces.



erika gisela abad merced, phd is a writer, poet, and budding essayist. You can find her work in such outlets as *The Feminist Wire*, *Mujeres de Maiz*, *Skin to Skin*, *Outrider Review*, and *MujeresTalk*.

alex garcia is a twenty-year-old transgender, demiromantic, demisexual freelance illustrator. More of faer art can be found at alexpgracia.tumblr.com.

mainstbooksmonroe.com

MainSt.Books



a boy named thomas

by evelyn deshane

Introduction: The Transgender Narrative

When I wrote my first book, I was a girl writing about boys.

When I started the second book, I was a boy writing about boys.

By the time I had finished the second, I had already turned one of my "strong female characters" into a man. Herein lies the first problem of the transgender narrative: you make life imitate art and then imitate it back again. Like an ouroboros, there is no beginning or end in sight. I do not know where the change quite happened for me, the moment of revelation or epiphany where I realized who I truly was. But I can tell you two things that I know for sure: I am a writer, and my gender has been the best story I've ever told.

In that second book, it was as if I recognized the signs and symptoms of that transgender character like an overarching godhead, and I did not want him to suffer anymore. So my character Jasmine became Hunter in a flick of a sentence. From she to he and then everyone was addressing him without qualms or discussion, like some wonderful utopian future. Except that I had set the story in New Jersey in 2006 and gay marriage wasn't even legal yet. The character Hunter was pregnant, too. He was eight months into having his first baby and in the middle of a kitchen making tea when I, as the writer, decided that he was going to utter the words to his husband, "I need you to call me Hunter."

Of course, Thomas, the husband, did so without question.

I had changed something so fundamental about these characters. At least, that's what I first thought. By the time I got to the end of this book, I realized that changing Jasmine to Hunter was as simple as changing he to she or the other way around. It was language. It was perception. Like the book I was writing, our gender was a story we told ourselves every day. We could wake up, decide to make tea, and then suddenly realize we were someone else.

These were my characters, and for a while, they were my legacy.

The Story of A Story

When I was eighteen, I wrote this really long story staring Thomas and his previous lover Bernard. Then I posted it on the internet like a fool.

Technically, the work is fan fiction, but I changed the names and set it in an Alternative Universe from the initial "canon" of the fandom. For those readers unaware of fandom terms, the easiest correlation for

what I did is *Fifty Shades of Grey*. That book started as a contemporary Alternative Universe fan fiction of Stephen Meyers' vampire world, which E. L. James eventually made into her own empire by changing some names and details. That is basically all there is to my book, too (except without sparkling vampires, I promise). My story is just as long as the *Fifty Shades* Saga and filled with badly written sex scenes, but with two men instead of a problematic BDSM. Though I had been writing for a long time before I posted my story, fan fiction allowed me to experience things I never had before and also gave me things I never expected.

When I would read books (or watch TV or listen to music) as a child, I would imagine myself inside those worlds and in the characters' minds. Reading *Harry Potter*, I wanted to be him and not Hermione. Instead of Lucy or Susan from *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*, I was Edmund (even if he kind of ruined everything). Instead of Lisa Simpson, I was Bart. You get the picture—I wanted to be a boy. This was obvious to me, even if I had no concept of transgender life yet. I didn't even know little girls could "grow up" to be boys. So I settled for something in between. I pretended to be a boy as I wrote novels as a child on loose-leaf paper. I scoured baby name books for really good boys' names. I became Duncan and Tucker and Jamison and Ned, before realizing that I really liked the name Thomas. He would become my best character, the one I would write about the most and put all my time and energy into. I loved my characters more than myself and the life I was living. It's really not as sad as it sounds. This was what I did instead of video games, instead of going out late at night and partying with friends. I sat on my computer or outside with my notebooks and I created characters. When I realized that by writing I could escape my own psyche and whatever discomfort there, then I knew I could be free. That was all that really mattered.

Fan fiction allowed me to have an audience and, therefore, validation. I was able to spend time in a fictitious world that I loved so much, and because of the characters attached to the writing, people were interested in reading what I produced. After years of struggling to get people to pay attention to the person I knew I was—the writer more than anything else—I finally had readers. I could be a novice writer at seventeen with limited experience outside of my own notebook, but suddenly, I was getting comments on my work. Praise.

I am a
writer, and
my gender
has been the
best story I've
ever told.

Elated people waiting for updates, for my next projects, begging me for a specific storyline. The shows and the universe that I disappeared into when I was growing up suddenly opened up to me like a wide plain, a large berth, that I could insert myself into as a creator and live there until I wanted to come out. When I went to university and didn't have to worry about the all-day commitment of high school, I disappeared into fandom and writing even more.

This feeling of entering a world in fiction is what Matt Hills calls "hyperdiegesis." The late nights I spent drinking coffee until five in the morning and writing fan fiction while watching fan videos is what Henry Jenkins calls "participatory culture." Fan writing, in academic terms, is called "textual poaching," according to Jenkins. He's written quite a few well-received books on the topic. The academic language of fan fiction, especially since Comic Cons and nerd culture are becoming more accepted in everyday parlance, is now respected. But none of this mattered to me. I liked fan fiction, and slash fan fiction at that, where I could focalize myself behind a male character having sex with another guy. The whole process was like discovering I was gay. My "coming out" became penning these stories and then posting them online. The fact that people were responding to what I wrote was even better. It was like, dare I use the stereotypical trope, looking in a mirror.

So I wrote this really long story. It clocked in at around 500k first draft, and really, I know it's probably not *that* amazing. (I'd like to think it was at least better than *Fifty Shades*, but who knows? I was barely eighteen when I wrote it, and we all know what we were like at that age). But people read it. People *still* read it. I get comments on it to this day. I've had people tell me that reading this book changed their life. They've drawn me pictures from it and written me letters about it. I've even seen some tattoos from this work floating around online and fan fiction from my original fan fiction itself. Talk about an ouroboros! Even thinking about this sometimes feels like falling down a rabbit hole.

But the thing is, I got so attached to this story, to the boy named Thomas who I lived my life behind, that I thought I was him.

A New Start

Flash forward to a few years later. I've graduated from university with a degree in English Literature and Gender Studies. I have stopped writing fan fiction and removed myself from the community that used to embrace me because of that overwhelmingly popular fan fiction. I also stopped eating meat, in hopes to change something more substantial about my life. I became vegan a month later and would stay a very strict vegan for quite some time.

By doing all of these things to change my life, whether I realized

it or not, I had been trying to mimic my character's life. Even coming out as a lesbian ended up being a strange, backwards attempt to view myself as gay—just like Thomas did. I realize now I'm bi, but being with men at this time in my life was too hard. I wanted to be a man so badly that I could not be around them. I couldn't even allow myself to write about men getting dressed and shaving without wanting to sink back into my dorm room and write until five in the morning while listening to fan videos. The only way I could leave the safe space of the internet was to transform my everyday life into something with purpose. Hence the veganism and my sudden proclivity towards feminism and protests. I had to live with meaning if I was not going to write books anymore.

Then I dated this woman. She was trans. She showed me Julia Serano, queer politics, and some really good movies. But most importantly, she showed me it was actually possible for me to grow up to be a man and not some strange fiction. So I shaved my head full of hair while in my mom's kitchen over a long weekend, listening to the *Rocky Horror* OST and "I Want To Break Free" by Queen. I picked a new name and reserved my middle one for that character I loved so much. I went shopping, bought a binder, and wore way too much plaid. If I couldn't write fan fiction, then I would try to create myself. If coming out of my stories was too painful, then I was going to try and turn the everyday world into a story.

Gender was whatever story I wanted to tell myself that day. That was who I became. And nothing was permanent.

It more or less worked.

Months into my transition, I was still building scenes and scenarios in the back of my mind, thinking of dialogue, and working towards a new book. Where I had once thought I wrote because I needed to experience being male in some way, I soon realized that writing was so much more than that. Writing was what I had been doing since I was very young, no matter the body I was in. Writing was the only thing I really ever wanted to do.

So I started to write a sequel to the original fan fiction that got so popular. One where Thomas got back with his old lover Bernard, got his best friend pregnant, and decided to raise the baby anyway. Drama! But it was *queer* drama, deliberately so, because these people were gay, in a polyamorous relationship, and by the end, Jasmine had

become Hunter, so it was really three men raising a daughter together. And during the winter I wrote it, I realized something so much more profound than the first book. The first one had made me feel free, and I had tried to cling onto that feeling like a life raft, when feelings are so ephemeral.

But when I made Jasmine into Hunter, I realized I could make myself out of the person I had changed myself into. From a girl writing about boys to a boy writing sequels, I could suddenly become something else. A chimera, a conduit. Whatever it was called in a political sense—bigender, agender, genderqueer—I don't really know. I realized I was only what I appeared to be, only whatever I created, and only in that particular moment in time.

Gender was, at least to me, whatever story I wanted to tell myself that day. That was who I became. And nothing, not even Thomas and his world, was permanent.

Self-Published Identity

In spite of writing this long book and its sequel, I feel as if I have never been published. But I know that's not quite right: I've been self-published. And do you know what? Self-publishing was better than surgery. It was better than any hormone or drug that made me into my characters. Because all it took for me to change was to finish the second book. As soon as I finished, though I had been living as a man for a year at that point, I realized that I was no longer that person.

I was a writer. That was it.

I eat what my characters eat. I dress how they dress. It does not matter if my character is a trans man, a lesbian, or a fox that talks too much. I live through my characters' minds, and I will continue to live through the characters that I have come to love more than my own skin.

The truth is that I can't just be one person. I want to be all of them. I got so consumed by the transgender narrative and the signs that I thought pointed to a larger meaning and purpose in my life. But transitioning never helped me. I knew what it was like to be a guy, but it wasn't that over-the-moon elation I saw other people experiencing after they had transitioned. I knew what it was like to be a guy, but that guy was Thomas. And to a certain degree, I knew what it was like to be Hunter. But after I finished the book, like all books, I woke up the next day as a different person.

It took a while to undo what I had done. Coming out is hard, but try coming out and going back without erasing what has just happened. I didn't want people to think that my prior gender identity had been a "mistake" or a "fake." Even though I didn't want to walk around

anymore and pretend to be Thomas, that didn't mean that he wasn't still a huge part of me. It doesn't mean that the person I am now is any better than him, either. So often transgender identity, like sexuality, is considered to be a straight line. A narrative with a beginning, middle, and end. But I know from a visceral reality lived in fiction that nothing is ever black or white. Everything is divided into chapters and vignettes; it moves back and forth and always, *always* requires revisions. Even here, I've rewritten these words so many times my fingers bleed. Gender is always a good story, but I'm trying to make it my mission to tell even better ones, beyond the massive tomes of my youth.

To this day, people still have no idea who I am. My by-lines and pen names change all the time, more than the ones on my new birth certificate. But that's okay. I'm okay with the weird anomaly of gender and the change that comes from it now. Never being pinned down means I'll always have more books to write. More than anything else, that's the ending I could have hoped for.



evelyn deshane is a first year PhD student at Waterloo University, examining fan studies and transgender identity online. Evelyn has written articles on transgender issues for *The Atlantic*, *Plenitude Magazine*, *Hoax Zine*, and the forthcoming anthology *Trans On the Internet*. Read more of Evelyn's work at paintitback.tumblr.com.

on circumambience

by kevin mclellan

I don't miss him

rather the zinc taste
his zinc taste

which is also to say

my saliva is far away
from his heart



kevin mclellan is the author of *Tributary*, and the chapbooks *Shoes on a Wire* – runner-up for the 2012 Stephen Dunn Prize in Poetry – and *Round Trip*, a collaborative series of poems with numerous women poets. You can find more of Kevin's work at tiny.cc/kmpoetry.

the best day

by claudie arseneault

Varden remembered the previous night spent staring at the ceiling of his tiny room, too excited to sleep. He couldn't wait for today's ceremony and wasn't worried in the least about the test. The Firelord had brought him this far, and they would not let him down. Varden would become a full-fledged priest of Keroth, the first isbari to achieve this position in Myria, and no one could stop him. It would be the best day of his life. Every time he closed his eyes he imagined the ceremonial chamber and pictured himself enduring the trial without wavering, and his heart sped up with pride.

It kept him from sleeping, too, so Varden had fallen back on his secret passion to kill time. He'd picked a bit of charcoal from his fireplace and started sketching with it, filling sheet after sheet with quick drawings.

The priests wouldn't believe the number of charcoal drawings he'd whipped up through the years, then thrown into the flames. Men holding hands, men kissing, men naked or dressed. Hours passed as he let his imagination drive the piece of charcoal, blackening his fingers as he traced sculpted abs. This art was a prayer to Keroth, who had created fire's beautiful dance, and Varden threw every sheet into his room's small fire with thankful words.

He tried to remember the contentment those words had brought him on the following morning.

Now that hot coals lay before him in a long stretch, waiting for his bare feet, fear had replaced pride in the quick thumps of his heart. The easy confidence from his previous night had vanished. Varden's insides squirmed, and he couldn't help but gaze at the majestic ceremonial hall. He wished for the umpteenth time that another isbari was in the room with him. Only myrian faces stared back. Pale white, thin and angular, too often blond. Varden longed for a friend with brown skin and thick dark hair, someone who understood what it was like to evolve in a myrian world and defy their expectations. He knew better than to ask. Isbari lived in chains or in fenced neighborhoods. Only Keroth's good will had brought him to this temple today to face the last trial before priesthood.

That, and Varden's determination. More than twenty myrians stared at him now, hoping he would fail, praying he would burn himself and be rejected by Keroth. Varden raised his chin, puffed his chest. They did not understand. Keroth burned in him already, the god's energy wrapping like protective hands around his heart, their warmth spreading for head to toe, dwarfing the room's stifling heat. Varden smiled, then took his first step on the glowing coals.

The rocks were cool under his skin. He set his second foot down. The coals dug in his soles, pushing against muscle, but they did not hurt. He took another step. Slow and steady. Many acolytes ran over the coals, hurried as their feet sizzled, and held back tears against the pain. They were still ordained. After all, they had crossed the burning stretch despite their tears. Varden straightened and almost laughed. He continued forward at a slow and ceremonial pace, the frowns of consternation feeding his gleeful pride. Here was an isbari teenager, shunned as inferior, mocked by the others acolyte, crossing the coals as only High Priests did. Slow and steady,

the glowing rocks cool under his soles.

When he arrived at the other end, he bowed to the masters. Hiding his pride proved a greater challenge than the walk. He kept his head bent, waiting for the official declaration.

"Acolyte Varden Daramond, we welcome you into Keroth's warm embrace. Here are your robes."

Varden ignored the palpable irritation in the High Priest's voice and straightened up. Sixteen and already taller than him. Not by much, but enough to look down as he extended his arms and received the burnt orange robes.

"Thank you, High Priest."

He said it with all the reverence in the world, like he hadn't heard their disappointment, like he wasn't aware of how much they hated him. He did not limp as he walked to the line of newly-ordained priests, for he had not suffered the slightest of wounds. They shuffled aside, leaving him a slightly bigger gap than most, and Varden thought there was a new layer to their disdain. A small film of fear and envy. The young priest smiled through the rest of the ceremony.

Twenty myrians kept glancing his way, like they couldn't quite believe what they had seen. Twenty minds in which it was slowly sinking that an isbari, the scum of the world, the lowly slave, had excelled at this ceremony and was more fully embraced by Keroth than they could ever dream to be.

This is it, Varden thought. The best day of his life.

Little did he know it was just a beginning.

...

Newly-ordained priests and acolytes were always allowed a free afternoon after the ceremony. Deer was grilled on large grates in the gardens, excited teenagers chatted under ancient trees, and older priests discussed performances in low voices, already setting their sights on candidates for higher positions. Varden strolled through the gardens, aware of the occasional stare he still drew. No one called for him, however. He might no longer be mocked, but that didn't make him a friend.

He stayed in the main garden for an hour, more out of duty than anything else. He had just been ordained, after all, and he should attend these events. But after spending an afternoon staring at boys his age cross a path of coals, flames sometimes licking their acolyte robes, the urge to be alone was strong. The intensity of the trial—the risk of deep burns and failure—brought a strange vulnerability to their expressions. It stirred a new kind of feeling inside Varden, different than the urge to prove them wrong, to be the best of them. It made him want to take their hands and tell them it would be okay, to wrap his arms around their bodies, to feel them under his touch.

One, in particular. He was tall and muscular, with large hands and fuller lips, a healthy tan to his skin rather than the sick pale myrians loved. Varden often found himself thinking of these hands on his hips, of their bodies pressed together, of the pink lips running across his darker neck. And when that happened the world grew hotter than any of Keroth's trial, an unbearable heat that dried his mouth and dizzied him, and he knew he had to escape. Find a corner until it passed, until the pull below vanished.

Now would be a great time to do so. Varden swallowed hard, snatched a hot charcoal from under a fire and snuck back inside the temple. Sketching always helped assuage desire. A few more personal prayers

would help him. He was looking forward to another drawing session when his name carried through the open halls.

"Varden? Varden!"

Varden stopped, surprised at the warmth in the other's voice, the deference and awe. He turned to see Miles cross the hall toward him with a wide smile that lit his features and stretched his full lips. He held his newly-acquired robes through chubby fingers as he walked, thick legs pumping with every stride. Miles had been the first to cross the coals earlier. He had done so at a brisk pace and with an occasional yelp.

"Were you leaving the gathering so soon?"

At another time Varden might have told him off, but today had been great, and he felt like he could take on the world. Besides, he rather liked Miles. He was quiet and kind, had never mocked him, and slipped smiles his way whenever others weren't looking.

"Crowds tire me," Varden answered.

It was a well-known fact he often kept to himself. Miles didn't seem at all surprised. He put his fingers on Varden's forearms and a strange blush reached his cheeks.

"I was wondering if perhaps you wanted to walk? With me, deeper in the gardens."

The slight touch sent a jolt through Varden, and his answer shot out before he could think about it. "I-yeah."

Miles' delighted grin was reward enough. As they headed off, Varden couldn't help but study Miles again—an artist's habit. Broad shoulders stretched the priest robes a little, and again at belly's height. He took small strides, waving fattened hands about as he spoke. Deep blue eyes kept returning to Varden, like they couldn't get enough. They moved through the large gardens into the less cultured forest behind. There was still a clear trail, and when he paid attention, Varden could tell where trees had been cut and others planted.

He wasn't really paying attention. Miles' hand kept brushing against his, each little touch leaving him craving for more. The dizzying possibility that these might not be accidents made it hard to focus on Miles' words. Varden forced himself to concentrate.

"You were fantastic this morning," Miles was saying. "So powerful, walking down that lane. It was like ... like Keroh had lit a fire so strong inside you, you couldn't feel the heat under your feet. It was beautiful." His voice turned a little raw as he said the last word. Like he'd wanted to say something else altogether but couldn't push himself to. Miles cleared it with a small cough. "Oh! Look ahead. I love this place."

They had arrived at a small clearing, with the occasional branch of trellis jutting out of the ground and arcing overhead. Almost like a gazebo but more discreet. Strong vines climbed the trellis, obscuring the white wood underneath. No, not vines, Varden realized. Fireflowers had bloomed all along the plants' stems, starting a foot off the ground and all the way to the tip of the high arcs. The flowers had earned their name because of the shape of their delicate petals, their deep orange color, and the fact they bloomed only on the hottest summer days. The last week had been a particularly heavy heatwave, and now the clearing was sprinkled with orange sparkles. Varden's breath caught in his throat and his fingers tightened on the piece of charcoal he'd snatched. His urge to draw was getting stronger by the second.

"Varden..."

Miles had stopped walking as they entered the area. His intense blue eyes stayed on Varden until they caught his gaze. They made his priest robes hot and stuffy. Had the day grown a couple of degrees hotter?

"Y-yeah?" Varden managed to ask.

Words had always come easily to him, but all of a sudden they became the hardest thing. Not for Miles, though. He seemed to have the opposite problem.

"There's something I've wanted to do for a while, but I really needed to ask you first. I could never quite gather the courage, but after the ceremony earlier I just couldn't wait anymore." He stepped closer, wringing his hands. When he noticed this, he stopped and shook his fingers, as if to dispel the nervousness. Then he raised his head, licked his lips and took a deep breath. "I think you're wonderful. Like ... really, really great? Not just as a person. I mean, hum... Can I kiss you?"

Varden froze. He couldn't quite believe what he'd just heard. It had to be the deafening blood thumping in his ears. Yet he nodded a little. Just in case. Miles stretched closer, his eyes wide like he wasn't sure this was happening either. Their lips touched. Just a light contact, a possibility of more.

Varden's heart raced. His hand reached for Miles' shoulder and he pulled him closer. His lips were soft and wet and warm, and though it lasted only a second the kiss made him dizzy. Varden ran his fingers down Miles' chest and belly, the forms round, not sculpted at all. He wasn't like all his sketches. He was fuller. Less ideal and at the same time way more perfect.

There was a hand on his hip. Not the large and long hand he'd so often dreamed of, strong and controlling. Miles' hands were short and chubby, and his fingers drew Varden close with timid tenderness. It was better, so much better, to feel his arms wrap around him, to be held like he was the most precious gift around, wanted but unexpected. They parted and Miles didn't quite let go. They hadn't even really kissed—no tongue, just their lips pressed together—but Varden's legs were ready to give in. A new fire had been lit inside, and he didn't know how to control that one yet. Miles sketched a smile, looking up at Varden with wide eyes.

"I know it's complicated, but I want to know you. To be with you."

Varden struggled for words and instead gripped Miles' hand. They didn't even know each other, but Varden's heart threatened to burst with hope. His prayers had been answered. He pressed the charcoal into Miles' palm.

"Keep this in your room, and paper. When I can I'll come, and I'll show you something important to me."

Miles' incredible smile was all the answer he needed. The young priest glowed from inside, and just seeing him like this made Varden feel lighter. He could've stepped on thousands of burning coals right then, looking at the sweet grin, and never felt a thing.



claudie arseneault is a young French Canadian asexual writer. She spends her days finishing her Immunology Master, and her nights writing queer science fiction and fantasy. She is the author of *Viral Airwaves*, a brand new solarpunk novel. Read more at claudiears.wordpress.com.

the sorceress who had no heart

by coral moore

Unegen raised her bow and nocked an arrow. Beneath her, Altan's legs churned at a canter. The mare had a smooth gait, but Unegen was still jarred with every stride. She concentrated on rolling with the motion, and when she was satisfied that they were as moving as one, she drew back the bowstring with her thumb. She adjusted for their movement and the wind, and then she loosed. Not her best shot ever. She knew that as soon as the arrow left her fingers. Still, she hit the target just a bit off center.

As she slowed the mare, her brother Oyugun pulled up alongside, his long hair flowing out behind him. "I think you're better than me now."

She smiled up at her eldest brother. His face was tanned dark from long days in the sun. "You could beat that shot."

Fine lines around his eyes deepened with his answering smile. "Perhaps."

She stroked Altan's neck. "Thank you for teaching me." The other hunters had laughed when she said she wanted to learn the craft, but not Oyugun.

The mirth fell away from his face. "It's been my pleasure. I've never trained anyone who tries as hard as you do."

"I don't have the luxury of giving up." She gave Altan another pat, no longer able to meet Oyugun's eyes. They both knew that sooner or later she would have to give up the hunt.

For a long moment, the only sound was the hissing of the dry grass around them and the passage of their horses through it. The campfire stories of sorcerers who came for disobedient children in the night didn't scare her nearly as much as the prospect of losing the freedom she loved.

When Oyugun finally spoke, his voice was low and soothing, as if he was talking to a skittish horse. "Father wants to see all of us."

Unegen turned back to her brother, making sure her face betrayed none of her turbulent emotions. He led the way into the sprawling encampment.

"Did he say what he wanted?" Unegen asked as they approached a group of horses grazing in an area of younger grass. They handed off their horses to a pair of boys minding the herd for cooling out.

Oyugun shook his head and continued on to their father's yurt at the center of the camp. He ducked to enter the low doorway of the dwelling and waited for her to enter before lowering the door flap.



Unegen wrinkled her nose as the faint scent of kumis surrounded her, sour after the fresh air outside. Her father rarely indulged in fermented milk unless celebrating or mourning. She wondered which occasion this might be.

Her other four brothers were already kneeling before their father's chair. The gnarled wooden chair, passed down for generations from father to son, was the one piece of furniture in the entire camp. Oyugun winked at Unegen before taking his place at the far left of the line.

Unegen moved to the right side and knelt. She tucked the front edge of her hunting deel under her knees so as not to wrinkle the heavy fabric. She clasped her hands before her, bowed her head, and waited.

A whisper of slippers over a woven mat announced the clan chief's entrance, but none of the children moved so much as a finger. When the chief of the larudi finally stood before them, he clapped his hands. All six siblings looked up as one. Unegen's father looked slowly over the line of his offspring, starting with Oyugun and working his way toward Unegen. He smiled broadly, deep lines creasing his weathered face.

"I have said since the day the first of you were born that my children are my life. For this reason I have kept all of you close, probably for longer than I should have. The time has come for you to begin your own families."

One of her brothers muttered something that drew a sharp look from her father. Unegen swallowed. She'd been dreading this day for years. Her father indulged her interest in what were traditionally men's pursuits, but her husband likely wouldn't.

"As is our way, my sons will find wives from outside. Oyugun, I trust you to lead your brothers on a hunt for suitable brides."

"Of course, Father. What of Unegen?"

"She will remain here with me. I couldn't bear to be parted from all of you at once. Find her a husband in your travels as well. Bring her a man with a backbone or she'll trample him."

Her brothers and her father all laughed. Unegen's cheeks heated. "If you truly love me, you will bring me no man at all."

Her father's face became serious. He stepped closer to her and cradled her chin in his calloused hand. "My fierce little fox. I only want you to be happy."

"Then let me stay by your side forever. I want no husband, no children. I want to ride and hunt, as you do."

"You will grow out of that, and you will thank me for ensuring you didn't turn into an old unmarried aunt in the meantime."

Unegen scowled, but she didn't argue further. She knew he wouldn't change his mind, no more than she would.

Oyugun broke the tension with a hearty chuckle. "I will find her

a husband as pliable as the high grass in the summer wind. That is the only way he'll survive her wrath."

The men laughed again, but Unegen didn't. She clung to the hope that, in the excitement of finding himself and his brothers brides, Oyugun would forget all about finding her a husband.

...

Moons passed into seasons and summer came around again, and there was no word from Unegen's brothers. Her father sank into despair. He sent scouts in all directions to search for them, heedless of the cost.

The clan began to suffer from the lack of men. For the first time in her life, the other hunters seemed pleased to have Unegen join them to fill their depleted ranks. She worked hard alongside the other hunters to fill the near-empty smokers, and in so doing gained the respect of men who had once scorned her desire to learn from them. Still, every dusk that fell without the return of her brothers brought further unease.

Unegen desperately wanted to join the searches, but her father would hear no word of her leaving. He shouted that she couldn't possibly survive an enemy that had bested her five brothers, and perhaps he was right. Regardless, she packed secretly and headed off one night with only Atlan for companionship.

...

Unegen rode her mare over a wide stone bridge to the Palace of the Seven Waterfalls. She had followed the trail of her five missing brothers from the dry steppes into the verdant foothills, and now finally to the cold severity of the mountains. The merchants and townsfolk nearby all told the same story. A sorceress had come down from the high reaches and conquered the palace in less than a day. Her brothers had last been seen within the walls, wooing the old king's handful of daughters. No one had heard from them since.

As Unegen approached the gate, the uneasy silence of the place sent a shiver through her. Atlan's hooves clomping rhythmically over the bridge was the only sound. She couldn't say exactly what bothered her until she glanced over the barren cliffs to either side of the palace walls. The waterfalls that lent their name to the palace were silent, stopped up so that the naked, water-smoothed stone face was visible. The amount of power required to halt the fall of that much water staggered the mind.

Unegen considered turning around. She could go back to her father and tell him what had happened. He would raise an army, and they would stand a better chance than one girl on her own.

Would they, though?

What chance did an army have against a sorceress? Even if her father raised a thousand men, would that be enough?

As she continued to ride forward, a row of statues came into view

in the courtyard, and they decided her. At the very front was a statue she recognized as Oyugun, and her stomach clenched. She wanted to cry out, to run to him and hug him just to feel him in her arms. He wouldn't hug her back, though. She drew a shaking breath and kept riding past them.

Oyugun stood frozen, having been turned to stone in the act of loosing an arrow from his longbow—the string still hadn't returned to the resting position. Neither the arrow nor his target was anywhere to be seen. What Oyugun aimed for, he hit. That his attacker wasn't in view meant the rumors had been true: the sorceress couldn't be killed by conventional means.

Her brothers stood in a semicircle, shielding five young women, also stone, from whatever had attacked them. They had been trying to escape through the gate, but the sorceress had trapped them all with her spell.

"You've wandered far from where it's safe, little duckling." A warm honey voice poured from the palace and smothered Unegen.

Atlan stopped abruptly, her hooves mired in something Unegen couldn't see. The mare's ears laid back. Her muscles strained as she tried to work herself free.

"Please don't hurt my horse," Unegen managed to gasp out.

The constrictive hold loosened somewhat. "Why don't you beg for your own life?"

She glanced over the darkened palace windows but couldn't find the source of the voice. "I'm ready to ride the winds with my ancestors."

The force binding Unegen fell away. "Leave the horse and continue forward. Try to escape and I will kill you both before you make it two steps."

Unegen dismounted and led Atlan to a patch of grass deeper within the courtyard. She continued toward the palace doors, checking

each window as she moved closer.

The doors were fashioned of the largest pieces of wood Unegen had ever seen. Ornate carvings depicted the waterfalls that should have surrounded the palace. When she was several paces from the doors, they swung inward. The sunlight only penetrated a few hand spans into the interior before being absorbed by the darkness.

"Come inside."

The voice startled her. She hadn't even realized she'd stopped. Getting her feet moving again was easier than it should have been, given the situation. Once she was inside, the outer doors closed with a heavy thump, and she was submerged in blackness.

Her breaths came faster. For what felt like a very long time, nothing happened. Something touched her face, and she flinched. A sound like low chanting brushed her ears, but she couldn't make sense of the words. Then light blossomed, so slowly at first that Unegen was sure it was her imagination.

Reclining before her was the most singularly beautiful person Unegen had ever seen. Long dark hair was piled atop the woman's head in intricate braids. Her cheekbones formed high angles that accentuated her skin, which was as golden and burnished as the dawn.

"Closer," the sorceress purred.

Unegen stumbled forward and ended up on her knees beside the sorceress. The scent of bluebeard flowers filled her head.

A gust of wind removed Unegen's hat and blew her hair back from her face. The sorceress reached to caress her cheek. "Why have you come, duckling?"

The truth almost came pouring out, but at the last moment Unegen caught her traitorous tongue. "I've heard stories of sorcerers, but I wanted to see one for myself."

The sorceress gripped Unegen's chin and pulled her closer, close



enough that Unegen could see her reflection in the night-dark eyes.

"You are a brave one." The warm wash of the sorceress's breath feathered her cheeks.

Unegen didn't feel very brave with her heart thumping in her throat like a frightened hare. "Thank you."

"Don't you have a husband to keep you out of trouble? You seem a likely age."

"I don't ever want to marry."

One corner of the sorceress's mouth lifted. "Neither do I." She released her grip on Unegen's chin. "You amuse me. I will keep you as a pet until you cease to."

...

Unegen knelt in the front room of the palace, trying very hard not to move. Before her, the sorceress lounged in an ornate chair with a leg draped over one gilded arm, her embroidered red skirt gathered above her knee. She could sit that way for hours, her unfocused gaze searching for something beyond the world that Unegen could see. The moment Unegen moved, the sorceress would come out of her trance and ask a question as if they'd been deep in conversation rather than sitting in silence for half the day.

The question was usually absurd, and often impossible, but the answer wasn't important. The sorceress enjoyed watching her squirm more than anything else.

Her calf twitched. Unegen let out a slow breath and wiggled her toes to try to relax her cramped muscles. She had been in the palace nearly a full moon cycle and hadn't made any progress in freeing her brothers. If the campfire stories were to be believed, the only way the sorceress could be defeated was to find where she'd hidden her heart.

Whenever she was left alone, Unegen searched for the sorceress's heart. The palace had a seemingly unending number of rooms and alcoves, all silent and cold as the coming winter. She looked under lavish, empty beds and in cabinets that bore the disintegrating clothing of the former residents, but she found no sign of a heart. She began to wonder if the key to defeating a sorcerer had been made up or was a symbol of something else.

She finally gave in to the building discomfort in her leg and shifted to sitting cross-legged.

The sorceress blinked. "Have you ever been in love?"

Unegen folded her hands in her lap, trying to hide how uneasy the question made her; that would only make it worse. "My father believes love is a conceit of the village-born with no place among the clans."

The sorceress tapped her lacquered nails against the arm of the chair. "I didn't ask what your father thought."

"I'm not interested in becoming someone's wife, so it's never

been a consideration."

"Also not what I asked."

Unegen looked down at her hands. Her nails were cut short and square because long nails weren't practical when knuckle-deep in guts. Why did she suddenly have the urge to grow them? "I love to hunt."

The sorceress didn't respond until Unegen lifted her gaze and their eyes met. "Tell me."

"I love to feel the wind on my face as I chase down my prey." Unegen paused, breathless. "I love the thrill when my arrow strikes true."

"And when the helpless animal falls to the ground, do you love that too?"

Unegen's cheeks heated. "I feel no shame for the lives I've taken."

"Yet you judge me for the same. I can see the disgust when you look at me."

"I kill so that my clan may survive."

The sorceress stood, the lines of her body taut. Power crackled around her. "The king of this place murdered the only person I ever loved when she wouldn't agree to wed his awful son."

Unegen recoiled when the sorceress's emotions pressed against her. Loss. Loneliness. Despair. So much pain that she couldn't draw a breath.

"That is what love is." The sorceress's voice echoed through the room, rattling the furnishings.

A tiny noise squeezed through Unegen's constricted throat. The idea that the pathetic sound might be her last act shamed her far more than the fact that she'd failed to see her brothers safely home. Then, without warning, the oppressive darkness lifted as if someone had thrown open the windows to let in the sun. Unegen collapsed, gasping for breath.

The sorceress turned and stalked toward the door, fists curled at her sides.

Unegen watched the sorceress's retreating form from the floor. She'd never considered that the sorceress might have a reason for her rampage. "I'm sorry he broke your heart."

The sorceress paused. "Because of him I have no heart." Her shoulders lifted and dropped with a heavy sigh before she continued on, leaving Unegen broken and alone.

Unegen didn't see the sorceress for two days. She spent most of her time in the courtyard, staring at the statues of her brothers. Every time she focused on Oyugun's face, tears threatened. He always knew what to do next.

She'd searched every dusty corner of the palace, but somehow she knew this was the last place the sorceress would have brought her heart. Unegen had failed to rescue her brothers, and she was out of

ideas.

When the sorceress finally returned, her fine dress was wrinkled and soiled. She wandered to the rock wall where Unegen sat and settled next to her. She glanced over the statues. "They were trying to protect the king's daughters from my wrath, which is why they're still alive."

Unegen swallowed. "Then why not let them go?"

"If I undo the spell, they will probably try to fill me with arrows again."

"But they can't kill you, can they?"

"No, but arrows hurt." The sorceress shrugged. "It's easier to leave them like this."

"Surely they have families that miss them?"

The sorceress turned toward Unegen, her dark eyes narrowing. "They didn't consider my family before they tried to turn me into a porcupine."

Unegen glanced at Oyugun. He focused on his target, dispassionate and calm. No, he wouldn't have considered the sorceress's family, or even her humanity. In that moment all that mattered was the arrow and the target. Didn't that make him the same as the sorceress?

Unegen looked back at the sorceress. "Where is your family?"

"A long way from here. I was born where the earth ends, far beyond the steppes."

"The giant sea of salt?"

"The very one. I'm surprised you know of it."

"My father saw it once. He likes to tell the story."

"When I left to train in the mountains, I was sure I'd never see home again." The sorceress gazed out over the grasslands far below them. Her lips were held in a tight line as if to hold back sharing more.

"I don't think I could make that choice."

"I didn't have a choice, not then. Powerful men wanted to use my talent, and my family was poor."

"Will you go back to see them now?"

The sorceress shut her eyes briefly, lashes casting long shadows over her cheeks. "I've become something they wouldn't understand."

"I'm sure they miss you and would like to see you all the same."

The sorceress nodded in the direction of the palace. "After this I would only bring them pain." Sadness marred the delicate curves of her face. She fussed with the ruined skirt of her dress.

As Unegen rose to join the sorceress, a surge of pity bloomed within her. She couldn't afford to feel sorry for the sorceress, not if she wanted to find a way to free her brothers. "I'll draw you a bath."

The sorceress caught Unegen's arm. "Why are you so kind to me? I've taken you prisoner." She tilted her head to one side, the fall of her dark hair stirring in the mountain breeze, vulnerable in a way Unegen hadn't seen before.



Standing so close, Unegen worried the sorceress would pick up on a lie. "There's nowhere else I want to be right now." Close enough to the truth, she hoped.

The sorceress sighed and leaned against Unegen's shoulder, the heat of her body a decadent counterpoint the cool mountain air. "I'm sorry I hurt you."

Unegen suppressed a shiver. The shape of the new plan forming in her mind disturbed her. In order to find out where the heart was hidden, she had to make the sorceress trust her. She wrapped an arm around the sorceress's back and guided her to the main doors of the palace.

...

Atlan was frisky when Unegen went out to feed her and the other palace horses the following morning. The mare wanted to play, so Unegen spent some time with her, chasing her around the gardens. Frost rimmed all the plants, but it melted at the first touch of sunlight. After a while, she felt the sorceress gaze on her and glanced back at the palace. The sorceress stood framed in the arched doorway, her hands tucked into the sleeves of her floor-length fur-lined coat.

Unegen grabbed a bunch of bluebeard she had gathered and

headed toward the palace. When she drew near the sorceress, she held the flowers out. "They're nearly wilted from the cold. I thought we should bring them inside."

Dark eyes appraised Unegen for a long moment, and then the sorceress reached for the flowers. She buried her nose in the blossoms and inhaled. A contented hum floated through the air.

"You must be almost as frozen as they are, come inside." The sorceress's voice was deep and velvet. The warm touch of her fingers closed around Unegen's chilled hand. Unegen let herself be drawn through the doorway into the front room. The sorceress turned back to say something, but Unegen pulled her closer and covered her open mouth with a kiss.

Unegen had never been kissed. A handful of young boys in her father's clan had tried, but most of them ran off when she shoved them away, and one had left with a black eye. That had discouraged the rest. She'd never understood the appeal. Until now.

The sorceress tasted of honey and spices from her morning tea. Her lips were soft and warm, and they yielded at the slightest nudge. Unegen lost herself in the rhythmic pattern of their mingled breath. Her heart raced when the sorceress clutched her tighter, their bodies fitting together as if carved from a single piece of stone.

Like a statue.

Unegen pulled away. Disgust nearly upended her stomach. How close had she come to betraying her family for a single kiss? The woman in front of her, no matter how alluring, had turned her brothers to stone.

The perfume of the bluebeard, crushed between them, was heavy in the room, a haunting memory of the kiss.

"You've never kissed a woman?" The sorceress finally said into the silence. She watched Unegen, dark eyes wary.

"I've never kissed anyone."

"You've got a natural talent, then." A small smile lifted one corner of the sorceress's mouth.

Unegen remembered the touch of those lips too well. Her cheeks burned and she looked away. "I'm sorry if I overstepped."

Petals from the ruined flowers drifted to the tiled floor as the sorceress stepped closer. "You didn't." She waited until Unegen met her eyes again. "Since Erdene was killed, I've had trouble connecting to this world. I'm thankful you came along when you did."

Unegen found the sorceress's direct attention somehow disconcerting and appealing at the same time. "What was she like? Was she very beautiful, like you?"

The sorceress smiled. "She would not have said so, but I thought so." She touched Unegen's face. Her soft fingers traced the curve of Unegen's cheekbone. "Sometimes you remind me of her. She was also

a creature too wild for the role she'd been born into."

Being compared to the sorceress's dead lover should have been a boon for Unegen, but an uneasy feeling settled in her gut and wouldn't let go. "Is that why you've kept me here, because I remind you of her?"

"Perhaps." The sorceress withdrew her hand. "Does that upset you?"

Unegen clamped her jaw. The idea that the kiss they'd shared somehow belonged to the other woman gnawed at her until she couldn't hold the anger back. "Yes."

The sorceress hesitated for a moment that drew out as she stared into Unegen's eyes. Finally, the sorceress looked away. "You are free to go whenever you like."

Unegen reached for the sorceress's arm. "I don't want to go."

"What do you want, then? I have nothing else to give you but your freedom."

"I want your heart." Unegen regretted the words as soon as they'd left her mouth. The truth of them made her eyes sting. She'd never wanted anything so badly.

The sorceress drew back, her face smoothing to an impassive mask. "What would you do with such a treasure?"

Unegen struggled for an answer that wouldn't be a lie and also wouldn't give away her true mission. She leaned closer. "Give it back to you, so you could see me and not just the ghost of her."

The sorceress pulled her arm free and turned away. Her shoulders rose with a sigh. "The ridge above this palace is home to a temple built when men first ventured into these mountains. They thought to commune with the gods by proximity to them." She wrapped her arms around herself and squeezed. "Within that temple there is a box that holds the item you seek."

Unegen had no idea it could be so easy as asking. Joy filled her to bursting. She could save her brothers after all. She was most of the way out of the room before she realized she'd taken off without saying goodbye. When she turned to tell the sorceress she'd be back soon, there was no one else in the room.

...

The silent elegance of temple loomed over Unegen as she tried to regain her breath. Her fingers burned, scraped raw on the climb up the cliff that had once been a waterfall. The sorceress had stopped the flow of water further upstream, and as a result, the arms of the river that had embraced the temple had been turned into muddy ditches.

Unegen waded through one sloppy channel toward the temple. With each step she thought she might lose her boot in the knee-deep mire. By the time she made it across, her legs shook with exhaustion and she was breathing hard again.

Closer to the structure, she could pick out the differences in color



and texture of stones that formed complex designs on the walls of the temple. Gilded accents at the corners and apex of the roof glittered in the afternoon sun. Whatever gods protected this temple were still in residence. She felt their stares. Unegen held her breath as she passed through the oversized doorway.

She hesitated just beyond the door to let her eyes adjust to the dim interior. Small footprints framed in dust showed the way the sorceress had gone. Unegen followed the path, the sound of her boots echoing from the cavernous ceiling. Tiny speckles of colored light danced over the floor in a strange circular pattern. In the center of the room, the footprints abruptly ended.

Unegen looked up. Ten body-lengths above her, a jeweled object shaped very much like a large bird's egg hung from a rope, and she knew at once that the sorceress's heart was locked inside. She glanced around the room, trying to find something that would help her reach, but the room was as empty as it was dark.

She squinted up again. The shot would be a simple one. She could hit a bird in flight at ten times that distance—but could she catch the egg before it fell? Before she could talk herself out of trying, she unslung her bow, drew an arrow, and stepped back two paces. Unegen knocked, drew back the string, and inhaled. She held the breath as she focused on the rope.

Easy. Just like the target games she'd played with Oyugun. She'd won those since she'd been able to string her bow alone. Oyugun often asked her how she could hit the smallest spot exactly every time, no matter the weather or what was going on around her. She always shrugged, not because she didn't know, but because the answer sounded ridiculous. She waited until it felt right.

The instant she loosed she knew the arrow would cleave the rope exactly as she had pictured it. She lowered her bow and stepped forward, reaching for the egg with her left hand.

Unegen was certain she was too slow. She didn't have any idea what would happen if she dropped the egg, but she didn't want to find out. She dropped her bow—the hunters of her clan would have been horrified—and held out both hands, stretching forward until the weight of the egg fell solidly into her grasp.

With a sigh, she cradled the egg against her body. The egg was slightly warm to the touch, and something inside pulsed with a slow rhythm. She tried to pry the jeweled exterior open, but aside from irritating her raw fingers on the glass, nothing happened. Unegen held up the egg. The pulsing grew louder and the pinpoints of light spun faster, bathing her hands and arms in gold, red, and blue.

She bit the inside of her cheek and wondered what to do next. No idea presented itself, so she tucked the egg into her pouch, collected her bow, and started for the palace.

On way back she thought of ways to get the egg open. She could try prying or crushing, but that seemed too likely to damage the heart inside. Unegen couldn't be sure if killing the sorceress would free her brothers, so she had to be careful.

When she reached the courtyard, she took the egg from her pouch and held it in both hands. The colored lights echoed the painted sunset sky above her in a way that made her smile.

Rather than call for the sorceress as she'd intended, Unegen paused. The egg seemed so fragile and the idea of smashing it so wrong. Once again, the beating of the heart within grew louder.

Unegen wondered at the pain removing her heart must have caused the sorceress. Was it anything compared to the pain of losing her only love? The colored lights brightened. She ran her fingers over the facets of the egg and the surface shivered. Then she knew, with no doubt, that violence was not the key to opening the egg.

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to one small pane of glass. The egg split open without a sound to reveal its contents.

Unegen had seen many hearts. She'd gutted all manner of animals. But never in her life had she seen an organ so obviously diseased. The heart of the sorceress was blacker than the sky on a moonless night and gnarled with blood vessels that had never existed in a mortal body. She almost dropped the egg when the heart suddenly lurched, but she managed to hold on.

"I see you've found it," the sorceress's disembodied voice said from everywhere. "Are you pleased with your conquest?"

Unegen swallowed and tightened her hands around the egg. The tips of two fingers brushed the warm surface of the pulsing heart. "The men you've imprisoned are my brothers. Set them free or I'll destroy you."

"Duckling," the warm honey voice said, "you would be doing me a service by ending my interminable life." The ground under Unegen's feet grumbled with displeasure. "But I don't take kindly to threats."

Lightning struck from a cloudless sky, so bright and loud that Unegen recoiled, instinctively cradling the egg and heart against her stomach.

The roaring assault stopped, and Unegen tried to catch her breath. "Set them free or I'll kill you." Her voice shook with fear and with the certainty that she could never crush the sorceress's heart. When there was no answer, Unegen lifted her head.

The sorceress stood before Unegen, tears shining in her eyes. "If you had asked me to release them for you, I would have."

Unegen swallowed past the ache in her throat. "Set my brothers

free."

The sorceress waved her hand absently. A deep, rumbling sound came from the direction of the statues. The sorceress turned away and retreated inside the palace. Unegen ran for the garden.

...

Her brothers and their brides readied their horses in the courtyard while Unegen watched the quiet walls of the palace. There had been an argument around the fire the previous night about what their next step should be. The group was split between those that wanted to hunt down the sorceress to try to kill her again and those that wanted to leave her be.

Unegen hadn't told them about the heart. It rested in its egg once more in the pouch that hung from her belt. They had asked how Unegen had freed them, and she responded by saying that she'd merely asked. They all laughed, but they seemed to believe her, except for Oyugun, who frowned but didn't contradict her. In the end, Oyugun had won them all to his side with the argument that hunting the sorceress put the ladies in too much danger.

They were all mounted and ready to set off when Unegen pulled Atlan out of line and rode next to Oyugun's mare. "I have something I need to do. Go ahead."

Oyugun's dark eyes scanned the front of the palace. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "She's still in there, isn't she?"

"She won't try to stop you. I'll catch up."

He gave her the full weight of his disapproving frown. "It's too dangerous."

"I've been here for weeks and she hasn't harmed me. I'll be all right." Unegen nudged Atlan to bring her around and end the conversation.

"Father will be proud to hear how you rescued us," Oyugun called after her.

"I know." She rode back toward the castle, wondering why he brought up their father now. She didn't look back as Oyugun informed the rest of the party that they would be moving on. If they saw worry in her face, they might not leave.

When she could no longer hear them, she brought Atlan to a halt and dismounted. Unegen walked the rest of the way to the palace on foot. She hesitated when she reached the doorway, then pushed the heavy doors open.

"I know you're still here."

"Where else would I go?" The sorceress materialized in front of Unegen, severe and beautiful. "I had hopes your brothers would try to get their revenge."

"Do you crave blood so badly?"

The sorceress paused, then shook her head. "No, but I didn't

want you to go."

Trying to ignore the blood rushing to her cheeks, Unegen cleared her throat. "I wanted to give this back to you." She pulled the egg, closed once more, from her pouch.

The sorceress examined the egg with a frown. "You should keep that. How else can you be sure I'll let you all escape?"

"Because I'm not going. I'm staying here." She hadn't been certain what she was going to say until the words escaped her. Relief eased the tension she hadn't realized she'd been carrying since her brothers had been restored.

The sorceress closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she sighed. "You should be with your family."

Unegen stepped forward, offering the sorceress the jeweled egg. "I've done my duty to them. They are free. I owe them nothing else. They would make me a slave to a husband I don't want."

The corners of the sorceress's lips trembled. "That's yours, to do with as you will."

Unegen lowered the egg and hugged it against her chest. "Then I'll protect it and put an arrow in the heart of anyone who tries to take it from me."

The sorceress smiled softly and reached to touch Unegen's face. The light from the egg intensified, bending swirls of colored light around them. In the distance, the sound of tumbling water began as tears fell from the sorceress's eyes.

• • • • •

coral moore studied writing at Albertus Magnus College. She mainly writes speculative fiction, including the *Broods of Fenrir* series. You can find more information about her work at chaosandinsanity.com.

kristina stipetic is a comics artist, creator of the queer romance graphic novel *14 Nights* (14nights.kstipetic.com). Her work has appeared in *Beyond* and *The Monster Anthology, Demon Edition*. She is an American expat living in Suzhou, China.

CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Oktopus Ink

We're currently accepting young adult and new adult sci-fi and fantasy novels and novellas featuring diverse characters. LGBT+ especially welcome!

For guidelines visit us at www.oktopusink.com

Tributaries by Illise Montoya



lesbian fantasy romance available at Amazon!

finding home

by a. merc rustad

The reality I was born in ceased to exist when I was three years old. So Mama and I moved to a different reality.

We moved a lot, actually.

"We can't stay more than a few years," Mama would say as she unzipped the fabric of the space-time continuum and scanned the flickering images inside.

There were so many that I got motion sick if I looked too long.

But Mama always knew which one to pick. She'd catch a corner of a shimmering image, brightly colored like rainbow sprinkles, then take my hand and pull us both through.

...

I met Amand in a coffee shop on a rainy day two years and nine months after my mother and I moved to this reality. The cafe menu offered various espressos and lattes, the Germanized English happily familiar. I thanked the barista and looked for a seat.

That first glimpse: Amand sat in a corner, reading *Die Liebe der Bienen*, a bestseller literary graphic novel that had a different ending for everyone who read it.

Grayish afternoon light highlighted his black curly hair and dark skin, and his glasses adjusted to the light flow, the rims bright blue. Broad shoulders were accentuated by the fashionable sweater he wore, navy blue with the New Chicago Physics (the local soccer team) logo emblazoned on the chest.

He flipped the last page and sighed, dark eyes half-closed in contentment.

He caught me staring at him. I was used to that by now. Odd looks when I couldn't lose my accent or maybe I had a neon sign over my head that read DOESN'T BELONG.

"What ending did you get?" I asked.

He grinned. "Dominik and Erik reconcile, and then Erik proposes and he accepts and they live well to their days' end. It's what I hoped for."

I smiled back. "That's the ending I got, too. Well, Dominik proposed when I read it."

"Amand," he said, offering his hand.

"Joseph," I replied. We shook. My heartbeat hadn't slowed, though I had yet to sip my cappuccino. "Can I join you?"

He nodded at the plush armchair next to him. "I would like this."

...

Each new reality was different.

Sometimes there'd be buildings in the sky, sometimes technology was less advanced,

and sometimes there wasn't anybody around at all.

(Mama picked those empty realities once in a while, but we only stayed for a few days.)

Mama had a talent for explaining who we were to the people in each reality: why we had weird clothes and accents, why our skin was the color it was, sometimes why I was a boy (if they hadn't been invented yet), sometimes why she was a girl, and sometimes why we had genders at all.

She had a gift. She knew which realities were unsafe. She could make people like us, or at least not hate us. She was extraordinary, but she never drew attention. Mama designed new cover stories depending on where we ended up. Mama never had trouble understanding the language. She'd teach me, but I didn't have her skill. It got harder as I got older, too, always being the weird kid.

"Don't make friends you can't let go of, Joseph," Mama always said. "We can't stay long."

"Why not?" I asked angrily when I was ten. I'd just met Mohamed, who lived down the street, and he was going to let me drive his custom-built racecar.

"Because our atoms don't belong here," Mama said, "and eventually we'll crumble into little pieces if we stay too long. Reality-bending is tricky."

So I didn't have many friends. I knew people, lots of people, but they were a sea of changing faces and bodies and names (or sometimes numbers).

I tried not to let Mama know I was lonely. We had to survive. She was trying to make a good life for us.

And she'd promised that one day we'd find Daddy again.

...

Amand and I spent the next two months inseparable. He showed me the old baroque district, full of niche clubs and piano halls and statues of composers, artists, and philosophers. We toured the Babylon Gardens, reconstructed and raised half a mile into the sky.

I was nineteen. I'd been in and out of so many schools I wasn't sure what level my education qualified. Amand had just finished college. He was applying for jobs in the energy reconstruction projects, striving for cleaner power and more of it. New Chicago was prospering, but so much of the continent was still ravaged from the Fallout War; reconstruction and rehabilitation for the country was slow.

Amand wanted to help change that. His determination was clear in every fluid movement, in the line of his jaw, in the brightness of his eyes. I couldn't keep my eyes off him when we were together. I didn't want to.

I didn't want to fall in love. Or maybe I did. It was so hard to tell.

...

"You're moody today, mein Herz," Amand said, rubbing his thumb over my knuckles. We held hands and leaned on the railing

I
didn't
want
to fall in
love.
Or maybe I did. It
was so hard
to tell.

atop the new hydroelectric dam. It wasn't technically open to tourists yet, but he'd snuck in before—his aunt was the foreman and the workers liked him—and told me this was the most stunning view of the sunrise you could see outside of the tower complexes. "What is wrong?"

I shrugged. "I have to move soon."

God, I'd told him when we first went out that I wasn't going to be in town for more than a few months. It was my mother's work schedule, I'd explained, and I accompanied her because she had health concerns. (The lies had been harder than ever before, stuck like congealed oatmeal in my throat.)

I was so tired of moving. But what choice did we have? Move, or cease to exist.

"But you don't want to," Amand said slowly.

I gazed down at the polished curve of the dam. It was a long way down, even with the safety nets strung at intervals across the face. "Nein," I whispered. "I like it here."

Amand slung an arm over my shoulders. "There is no one else who could take care of her while she travels?"

Mama didn't need my help. I needed hers. How long would it continue? Until she died from an accident or old age? Since I didn't know how to unzip the space-time continuum, I'd be stuck facing my inevitable death somewhere that wasn't home. Alone.

The depressive realization hit like I'd swallowed an old, bitter espresso shot. Dizziness swamped my head and I pushed away from the railing before I lost my balance or puked. Armand's arm steadied me.

The nippy wind tousled his hair and snaked down my collar. It was still dark, our only illumination the safety lights down the curvature of the dam.

"I can't leave her," I said. The first red bars of dawn peeked over the horizon, backlighting the uneven cityscape's profile.

Amand's expression was unreadable. "Well," he said at length, "We can always write or vidchat, and you can visit again, ja?"

But I couldn't, so I only nodded. I rubbed my face. The wind had made my eyes water.

He was right, though. The sunrise view from the dam was amazing.

...

My second favorite reality was where I met Dr. Amelia D'Cruz. Mom dated her briefly while we integrated into the tropical cities spread like a beaded bracelet around the equator.

I was six, and Mama had promised me she would look for a doctor who could perform gender reassignment surgery for me. It took her slightly longer not to call me Josephine, but only a little.

Dr. Amelia smelled like bubblegum and cinnamon, and she always smiled so bright that I wanted to smile back.

I told Mama I didn't want to leave when, almost three years

to the day—my surgery two years past—we packed our bags and said goodbyes.

I didn't know
what a home
was, what
stability
was like.

I clung to Dr. Amelia, who rubbed my back and kept saying, "It's okay, Joseph. You'll find a place you belong one day. You'll find your home. I promise."

I didn't believe her, and I didn't speak to my mom for days after we stepped into a new reality and started over yet again.

...

"It's time to go, Joseph," Mama said. We sat eating noodles and watching the news that same evening. "We have to leave tomorrow."

I set my bowl down, my stomach heavy. How had time gone by so fast? I thought I had another week left with Amand.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

She fiddled with her chopsticks. Her gaze remained on the screen. "We've been here too long. There's nothing for us."

"What?" That wasn't her usual explanation. She would tell me of the destabilization in her bones or the static buzz in her sinuses that told her we were getting close.

"He's not here," she said.

Dad had disappeared before I was old enough to remember. She said we'd find him and we'd discover a reality that we could live in as a family.

We'd wasted sixteen years. I didn't know what a home was, what stability was like.

All I could think of was Amand's face, his quirky smile, and his stuttering laugh. The way his hands felt in my hair and on my skin. How he always arrived on time. Even when his temper flared and we got into arguments about politics or history, he'd kiss me afterwards and say the way I confused the timeline was adorable, making up events in place of real ones.

(I hadn't told him that those events were real somewhere else.)

I stood up and slammed my bowl in the sink. "We're not going to find him, you know."

"He's out there somewhere," Mama said, almost to herself. "We aren't giving up on him. Pack your things."

She knew what she was looking for. She had always known.

I didn't know what he looked like, let alone what kind of man he was. She never told me stories; maybe she didn't want me to grieve for something I might never have.

I thought of Amand and how he always wore mismatched socks and programmed his glasses frames to match his shirts. Did I even know what I wanted?

I'd always been focused on not growing too attached, on being

able to leave everything behind. It felt like I'd grown up a hundred times and then fallen down the ladder to land back where I'd started, never knowing when it would stop.

Would I ever have what she had with my father if I always left before I could find out?

Mama put a hand on my shoulder. She had to reach, now. "It won't be forever, Joey."

I covered her hand with mine.

I was so tired of running and never getting anywhere. It had to stop.

"I know," I said. "That's why I'm not leaving."

I turned around in time to see her bite her lip.

"Nonsense," she said without conviction.

I held her hand tight. "I can't do this anymore. I want to stay here, with Amand"—if he would keep me—"even if it's dangerous."

"But..." She took several deep breaths. Arguing with herself. Finding excuses, reasons, commands. Her shoulders slumped. "You're grown up, aren't you? Not my little boy anymore."

"I'll always be your son, Mom. But I need to do this for myself. I need something to call my own."

She blinked hard. "You won't have much time. A few weeks at most. Please just come with me. We'll find your father—"

"No," I said gently. "A little time's better than having forever with nothing to show for it." That was one of Amand's favorite quotes from *Die Liebe der Bienen*.

What if she was right and I disintegrated once the three years were up?

Was that really worth hurting Amand? Or was it any different than stepping out of this reality, out of his life, forever?

"Please, Mama." I kissed her hand. "I need to stay."

She pulled me into a hug. Her body trembled. "Let me show you how to unzip the fabric," she whispered. "So you have a way out."

"No," I said into her hair. I wanted to be like the people around me, given one life to make what they would of it. "I'll take my chances."

...

I asked Amand to come with me to see my mother off the next day. I didn't know where she was headed.

We stood in a dry field outside the city limits as Mom unzipped the space-time continuum. Amand gripped my arm as we watched.

She held out her hand once to me, but I shook my head.

"Bye, Mom," I said.

She didn't say goodbye. Maybe she couldn't.

She took hold of a corner of another reality and pulled herself through. Then she was gone, and the seam melted closed.

I sagged against Amand.

Mama wasn't here. That sudden emptiness hit me harder than any reality-hop. My knees buckled.

He caught me and held me.

I didn't know I could miss her so badly so fast.

"What if I never see her again?" I said into Amand's chest.

The rims of his glasses pressed against my temple. "We always find our family." Then, softly, "Will you stay with me?"

"Ja," I said. "As long as I can."

I felt him smile.

...

I haven't seen my mother in ten years.

Amand and I got married. We adopted two beautiful children—Monique and Sebastian—and we've been living each day as if it's the last. It might be.

But, sometimes, I don't think it will happen the way she predicted. I don't think my mother wasn't entirely honest with me as a kid.

My dad ran off through a different reality when I was two. She waited a year, but he didn't come back. She wanted to find him the only way she knew how, and what else was she going to do with me except take me along?

Maybe the three year limit was just an arbitrary definition because she couldn't bear to stay anywhere too long and let Dad drift father away.

I'm not angry at her. If I hadn't reality-hopped, I wouldn't have met Amand. I wouldn't have settled down in this sky apartment overlooking New Chicago, landed a job as an art historian, found a loving husband, two amazing kids, friends, and a life I'm content with. (I dedicated my first memoir to Dr. Amelia and my mom, in gratitude.)

There are days I wonder if Mama was right about our atoms not connecting with this reality we live in now. One day, I might just snap out of existence. If I do, I won't have too many regrets.

(I'd told Amand my whole story after my mom left. He believed every word. The day before he proposed a year later, I told him again about the risk I could just vanish.

"Risks are just life with different letters," he said, and kissed me. "We'll take risks and life together, ja?"

"Ja," I'd said, pulling him closer.)

If I see Mama again, the only regret I'll have is that she won't stay for very long. Wherever she is, I hope she finds what she's looking for. Me? I've found my home.



A. mercurustad is a twenty-something queer, nonbinary writer and filmmaker who lives in the Midwest United States. Their stories have appeared in *Flash Fiction Online*, *Daily Science Fiction*, *Scigentasy*, and *Ideomancer*. Find more of their work at amercurustad.com.



THE HIDDEN AND THE MAIDEN

AN URBAN FANTASY NOVEL BY EBEN MISHKIN

ON SALE MARCH 4TH SCAN THE CODE
PREORDER TODAY
AT EBENMISHKIN.COM

TO READ AN EXCERPT
AND PREORDER



architecture of a blistex pot

by rebecca evans

Pungent. I felt his spit in my mouth;
I didn't know if I wanted more on the futon at four—dark outside.
Afterward,

he said he cheated on me and
I said I didn't care. As if his molecules were now separate
from mine.

He was the only one that noticed my hair
had changed. Caleb, who liked swords too much but

looked like Ryan Gosling and knew it. Color guard-girl told me
I looked like Rachel McAdams, so we were

the perfect fit. I cracked him up by
reading Revelations, but

didn't want him to break my seventh seal. Drowning in spit, too afraid
to swallow, to assimilate him. Fluid-bonded.
Disgusting.

I miss when I didn't have to pretend. I wanted to make him
happy, but not a man.

He told me my lips tasted sweet and that I needed practice. Thank God
he was a Christian. Out of all the people, I wanted him the most.

Not hyperventilate, heart-pounding want. Slow burn,
ember want. The thought of sex with him disgusts me.

Disgust. Sex. Sex is bad,
getting punched. Not with him. Sex meant fried chicken
before I was a vegetarian.

Still, not interested. Young "love"—we just wanted someone
to want us. Still do. I couldn't stop looking at his lips,

but I didn't want them: I read in Seventeen
I was supposed to.

Sometimes when I swallow, I think of him.



rebecca evans is an asexual poet and future English teacher. Her work
often explores the limitations of language in the face of strong emotion. You
can purchase her poetry chapbooks at tiny.cc/revans.



the hollow

by kendra leigh speedling

They came for Kaya first, all glittering eyes and hungry razor-teeth. When they smiled, their claws clicked together in unison, a macabre applause. I stood between her and them, hoping my knees wouldn't fail me, and said, "No."

They tilted their heads. For a moment, I swore they were frowning—what passed for a frown on those twisted faces.

"You can't," she said, looking as stunned as they were. Helplessly, she folded in on herself, her hand wrapped tight around mine.

"They shouldn't get to have you." I was proud; my voice shook only a little.

"No. No, no—they chose me, not you. It's all right. Go."

"I'm not leaving."

They clicked their claws again, until the leader glanced backwards. The clicking scattered to a stop, and the leader took a step forward. It brandished a claw at me. The message was clear: *Leave*.

"I'm not leaving her alone to die!" I shouted, blinking my stinging eyes.

The leader tilted its head at an even more exaggerated angle than the others. Confusion? Did they *get* confused? It struck me, suddenly, how little we knew about them, these things that we'd existed with, for, and under for so long.

Click, click. *Leave*.

"Nari." Kaya squeezed my hand. "You can't."

"I know," I said. "But I'm going to."

I didn't have much of a plan. I just knew that I wasn't letting them take her, not without a fight. In the days since Kaya had been chosen, I'd gotten all the information I could. Maybe it wouldn't be enough.

Then we'll both die, and I won't have to live with an empty space where my heart should be.

"But the village—"

"*Damn* the village! I'd tear down the sky to keep you if I had to."

She half-stood, clinging to my arm. They hadn't tied her up; it wasn't traditional. Ropes had never been necessary. People accepted their duty—at least, that's what we'd always been told. I wondered sometimes, hearing *them* howl at night, how many people's sense of duty had broken upon seeing them. It wouldn't have mattered. The creatures were fast.

They hadn't moved. Their stares made me feel like something was crawling around inside my skin, and I wasn't sure if it was my own fear or their power. The insanity of what I was doing struck me—you did not defy *them*—and I almost turned around and ran. Instead, I swallowed the burning terror in my throat and held Kaya close.

And I said The Word.

They flinched backwards, screeching, their fur-skin-flesh warping in two quick tremors before returning to how it had been. I clapped a hand over my mouth as I gagged; Kaya's hands went over her ears instead.

I bit my lip, hard enough to taste blood, and said The Word again.

Their shrieks were chillingly human. They went right through me, cutting down to the bone. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think—

Kaya squeezed my hand.

I struggled to stand up straight, my knees shaking. Slowly, the howling died away. I inhaled, the sharp air stinging my nostrils.

"The Bargain is off," I said, tumbling quickly through the memorized words. "You will claim no more of us. You will not venture near the village. We will no longer ask for your aid."

The leader's mouth parted in a terrifying grin. *Very well*, it seemed to say. Without a sound, it turned and padded back the way they'd come. The others followed, sneaking backward glances at us as they departed. We were left alone.

It was too late to be horrified with what I'd done, but it prickled me anyway. They were our power against the other villages. They were our gods.

But they had threatened Kaya. Kaya, who'd comforted me after my father went away; Kaya, who sang as she foraged through the outskirts of the woods; Kaya, who always wanted to search a little longer, explore a little farther into the forest. Some had said, when she was chosen, that it was fitting that such a curious person should be the one to face the creatures.

Given a choice between Kaya and salvation, I would choose her in a heartbeat.

Her weight pressed against me, a reassuring counterpoint to the foggy gloom.

"What are we going to do now?" she murmured. I loved her more for that small 'we' than I ever had before. She might have resented me for saving her, drawn away in horror at the enormity of what I'd done. But with one word, she declared herself my partner in truth. She would not even allow herself to consider that I'd done her no favors. That fear would haunt me alone.

"We'll have to go back," I said.

"They won't like that."

"No."

"What are we going to say to them?"

A hysterical laugh bubbled up in my throat. "That the monsters are gone."

The monsters were not gone.

They were simply no longer our allies against the world.

...

They shouted when we returned, their words sharp like teeth against my skin. *They were our only hope*, they said. *What have you done?* they asked.

I stood there, Kaya's hand in mine, and wondered why the things they said did not harm me more. They were all true, after all. Still, Kaya was standing warm beside me, and I could not bring myself to regret what I had done.

They did not know what to do with us. Those who went to the hollow were not meant to return, but there was nothing in place to deal with those who did, for it had never happened. They argued about our fates. It was suggested that we be brought back, tied up if necessary, to be taken by the creatures after all. Elder Liseth, with a face like a pickled lemon, said that this would not matter. What was done was done. No further sacrifices would undo it.

If nothing else, I thought, I had broken that cycle. No one else would have to feel the gnawing dread the creatures brought when they approached. No one else would have to watch their lover or parent or friend walk into the fog, never to return. That would be replaced with warfare. Simple. Straightforward. Blood might run through the grass, through the river, but it would not be devoured by *them*.

I tried to ask that Kaya be shown mercy. It had been my actions, not hers, that broke The Bargain. Their hearts were unmoved. In their view, Kaya was an even worse offender than I. She was alive when



she should not be, the ghost of the condemned walking among us. *Anathema*, they said.

They spoke of sending us to another village. Exile. Death, in truth, for homeless wanderers would not be welcome anywhere, and the only villages around us were enemies. Enemies, and barbarians, competing with one another to be the most bloodthirsty. The monsters had kept them from finding us.

Elder Jakov said that sending us away would not do. Even if the Daaeth or the Kor captured us and fed our insides to their dogs, it would not fix our crimes. And it would give them a trail to trace, back to the village, back to what they needed to protect.

They put us in a house together, an abandoned shack at the edge of the village, while they decided what was to be done. They knew we would not escape. The only thing around us for miles was the forest and the creatures that lived within it.

...

She looked older than I remembered her, although we'd parted only the day before. Had there been streaks of gray in her hair then; had her face been so lined? Or was this another consequence of my treason?

She did not acknowledge Kaya. She looked only at me, *through* me, as if she would strip the skin from my bones with her eyes.

"Hello, Mother," I said.

She slapped me once across the cheek.

Kaya moved forward to defend me, but I held up a hand to forestall her. Mother had the right. In the old days, she would have had the power to cut out my tongue for disobedience. We, however, lived in more enlightened times.

"You fool," she said. "Some things are buried for a reason."

She'd known The Word existed, of course; she'd been brought onto the Elders' Council last year. They all must have known. They had the book; they knew how to read like I did. How Mother must have regretted teaching me now.

They'd made their choice: the village first. Always. No matter what.

"I couldn't—"

"It's been decades of this." She was shaking, glaring right into my eyes. "Centuries, perhaps. And you think you can change it with one word? Stupid girl. They'll destroy us all."

Some malicious demon took hold of my tongue then. "Instead of one at a time. Piece by piece, they chip away—"

"Be quiet." I had never before heard my mother sound that cold. "Do you think you're the only person who had someone they didn't want to lose?"

In her voice were the sharp jagged edges of fear, not of the future, but of the past. Beneath her words, she was saying, *tell me it*

wasn't all for nothing. Tell me we couldn't have done this all along.

I had spoken to wound, and I'd hit true. My words were wrong, though...the village could have continued on like this. Forever. One person a year to the creatures, in exchange for protection for the rest of us.

I did not know whether it was right, or fair, or worthwhile. Perhaps it was a weakness in me, that I hadn't been able to stand the thought of losing Kaya. But I looked at my mother's face, twisted with rage and barely concealed terror, and I remembered holding her hand when I was small, both of us watching my father vanish into the fog. Had she wanted to stop it? Had she tried?

The children should suffer as the parents have suffered. It is only fair.

She shook me by the shoulders, as if I were a child again. I'd never realized how much taller than her I was. She had always seemed larger than her physical frame to me, until the day Kaya had been called.

I felt no anger, no pain. Only pity.

Having said what she wanted to say, she left.

...

The council made their judgment the next day. I held Kaya's hand as the words floated over us.

You shall both return to the hollow...one full night...if you remain alive afterwards... exile...never return...

Some part of me had known that it would come to this, from the moment that Kaya's name had been selected. I could not keep both her and my home, and I had made my choice.

They led us back to the hollow and tied our hands together, eliminating any doubt as to what they wanted for our fate. If they could not undo what we had done, they could at least get revenge.

They sat us down. They did not speak to us. We were outcasts, unclean.

"I'm sorry," I murmured to Kaya as they melted away, vanishing into the safe side of the fog.

"I'd be dead already if it weren't for you." She laid her head on my shoulder. "I'm sorry I had to take you with me."

"You didn't take me anywhere I didn't choose."

"You don't think about it," she said suddenly. "It's just how things are. You know them, you watch them disappear, but you think it's the way things have to be. Until it's you." She couldn't wipe her eyes with her tied hands; the tears were left to run down her face unchecked.

"I know," I said, holding her close.

"When I saw you walking towards me, I...I knew. You weren't going to let me go."

"Never."

"I don't know if I could have done it," she confessed, her voice small and broken. "If it had been you."



I brushed her hair out of her face, ignoring the rope pulling tight against my wrists, and kissed her. *Oh, Kaya. I know, my dear. You explore, and you wander, but you have never been one to fight. Not really.*

"It's all right," I said. "It's all right."

We waited for darkness to fall.

...

They surrounded us just after sunset. It was the same as the night before, as if time had gone backwards. I couldn't shake the feeling that it had, that what I'd done had been erased.

I said The Word, and they did not react.

Why—

But I knew why. The Bargain had given us power over the creatures, however small. Now that it was broken, The Word was no threat to them. The village had known what they were doing when they sent us here.

We are going to die.

Kaya's fingers tightened around mine.

"Together," I whispered. "Always."

The leader stepped forward and howled, sending a chain of noise throughout the pack.

"On this day," Kaya murmured, "we come together to make two souls one."

I turned to look at her, startled. She was reciting the vows,

though we were not yet old enough to make our partnership official. This coming year, we would be—would have been.

"We declare our partnership in front of these witnesses," I said, as the creatures completed their circle around us. "I am Nari Riverborn, and I am here of my own free will."

"I am Kaya Frostfell, and I am here of my own free will." Kaya's voice was soft, but it did not shake.

"I swear," we said together, "from this moment forward, to consider the two of us as one. I swear to respect your spirit in life and honor your memory in death."

I wondered if anyone else had ever taken their vows while seeing that death creeping toward them. I took a deep breath, feeling Kaya's hand warm in mine.

And I was not afraid.

"I swear to trust you above all others. I swear to comfort you when you are sad, tend you when you are hurt, and celebrate when you are victorious."

"I swear to be your ally in all things," Kaya finished, looking at me rather than the creatures.

They were simply watching us—waiting? No. Why would they?

"I swear," I said, my voice ringing through the hollow, "to be your ally." I stood up, helping Kaya to her feet. I would not die crouching underneath them like a child. "In all things."

I kissed her as they closed in, the fog swirling around us.

There was a moment of pain, and then nothing at all.

...

I opened my eyes.

I was dead. Or I was supposed to be. Was this the afterworld?

One of the creatures was lying beside me. I scrambled to my feet with a shriek. At least, I meant to do both of those things, but neither happened. My scramble turned out poorly, as I tripped over my own limbs and fell, and the shriek came out as more of an awful howl. A howl like...

I didn't have the right number of legs anymore. Looking down at myself caused a sense of such *wrongness* that I had to stop.

The creatures were still surrounding us, but I didn't see Kaya—yes I did. Next to me. Right where she had been.

We'd become *them*.

Had this happened to everyone? All the sacrifices? All this time, we'd been making more of them?

In the beginning, we were none, a voice grated in my head. I flinched backwards as the leader stepped forward. *There was the forest, with its hunger, and the humans, with their battles. That village made us to save them from the bloodshed.*

That was nonsensical. The creatures had always been in the forest, from the beginning of time.

"No," I tried to say, but it came out *No* in that same grating, internal voice.

The Kaya-creature was getting to her feet—I still thought of it as 'her'. Her mouth gaped open in a silent scream, those teeth glimmering in the moonlight. She spun around frantically, trying to orient herself, only to end up in a tangled heap.

The first, they say, had their souls torn from their bodies. The leader pawed at the ground, the dirt scattering under those misshapen claws. *That was the ritual. We others followed, year after year, as the first ones claimed us for their own.*

I don't believe you, I said. It was one thing for the village to obey the creatures' will, but *creating* them?

Do you not? Its eyelids flickered together, then apart again. *Such thoughts have long departed from human minds; they do not know this anymore. Still, they pay their toll, and leave their kin to die. That is why you broke the Bargain.*

This was so, and yet I did not like to hear it from that jagged mouth. The idea of the sacrifices being done out of calculation, not necessity, made my insides crawl as much as when I looked at *them*; we could not have made them, we could not.

Kaya rose to her feet, ungainly legs wobbling underneath her. *You wish us to join you,* she said, and she did not sound appalled.

You will join us, the leader said. *Or you will perish alone. The dangers of the world do not only apply to humans.*

Not alone, I said, glancing at Kaya.

It dipped its head in concession. *Not alone, then. But two will make as poor a defense as one.*

I met Kaya's eyes, such as they now were. I could not read her thoughts through the black filmy orbs, but I had a sense of her that I had not had before. I could *feel* her standing beside me, her calm wrapping around us both.

It's not true, I said at last, although I no longer believed my own words.

The leader turned to me, its black eyes implacable. *A fish does not believe in the existence of trees. What will you choose?*

I looked down at my claws. *Do I have a choice?*

In what you are, no. In what you do, always. It stepped closer, nudging my head up with a paw so I was meeting its eyes. *Choose wisely, dear one.*

Then I understood.

And I knew—in the same way that I was sure of Kaya's love—he wouldn't lie to me.

I choose life, Father.

He smiled his terrible grin, and it seemed a shade less terrible than when I'd first seen it. Only a small bit. But it was enough.

I choose Nari, Kaya said. I always have.

I did not tell her 'thank you.' I did not tell her 'I'm sorry.' I did not tell her 'I love you.' Because she knew all these things, as soon as they passed through my mind.

And I knew her reply.



kendra leigh speedling is a writer with a master's in library science and a passion for diversity in science fiction and fantasy stories. Her work has appeared in *Penumbra* and will be upcoming in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*. You can follow her twitter - @KendraLS.

savannah horrocks is an introverted nerdy weirdo who makes art and likes monsters, dogs, and toys. She volunteers at an animal rescue and still sleeps with a stuffed animal every night. You can find more of her work at savannahhorrocks.com.

proof

by johnny sfarnas

[i watch
you = a rapid setting sun slips under
horizon = mason jar lip = your quick eclipse
i.m nervous \geq thirsty
walls = (cherry / ginger)you blaze]

+

[celluloid gels cover the lights + actually it is already
night in + outside this brooklyn bar
where we come ~ perverse puritans
- the reproachful eye of the day]

good fuck \approx good drink
2xTall+hairly+fast+inexpensive+easy2get

my empty glass \neq a hand mirror]

+

[product of guy fondling my ass
= I turn + kiss him
some guy > no guy
but i = an inconstant variable
CO2 pools at the bottom of my esophagus + purges
= a little belch/giggle/stumble
=now outside + cigarette
(i don.t smoke ~ i don.t believe in god or guilt but still
both romp in my ribs ~ cage dancers enclosed in ivory
+ enclotted in red patent booty shorts
+ twerking like a dirty heart]

+

[you.re on the dance floor now we \div
((distance + bodies + time + strangeness)
- (desire x intoxication x your quadratic ass ^2))
my quotient body aches w/
the sum of hormones + recent release x 0 =
all DTF]

=

[i push through
the waves of eagle-eyed + bear clawed gays
+ a new romantic (mis)
understanding of salmon
shredding soft bodies scaling gravel and gravity
= entirely DTF

we.re dancing
hips in a tight orbit around a private world
your gyration expands at each new ellipse
~ with each pass the moon gets further from earth]

=

[we lived 450 million years ago
soon after land plants proliferated
we lay naked on night-dewed moss,
listening to each other breath in time with the mute
sonata of pre-existent crickets

i don.t know your name but i know that our combined gravities
= no gravitas
= your resting head on my glowing chest
as the huge moon floats over us
then behind the jagged black
lashes of prehistoric ferns
= my high + tutelary eye drifting closed]



johnny sfarnas is still figuring things out. He writes a lot of poetry
and works as an international flight attendant based in New York City.

awesome literature featuring queer protagonists

vitality is a literary magazine publishing exciting, entertaining fiction featuring LGBTQ+ protagonists. What we hear people asking for, most often, is more stories featuring queer people – and not just serious, often difficult-to-read “issue” work dealing with the hard stresses of real life, but fun stories that happen to be about queer characters, and portray queerness in a positive way.

In answer to this need, Vitality seeks to be an escape for the reader. A safe place full of wonder and awesome where the reader can see characters like themselves doing things like battling dragons, solving crimes, acting in a circus, or traveling the world. All genres and styles can be found in Vitality.

the only limit is your imagination

readvitality.com